

Acts Of Love

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/29374161) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/29374161>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Minecraft (Video Game) , Video Blogging RPF
Relationship:	Clay Dream/GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF)
Character:	Clay Dream (Video Blogging RPF) , GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) , Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF) , Alyssa ItsAlyssa (Video Blogging RPF) , Alexis Quackity , Karl Jacobs , Callahan (Video Blogging RPF) , Jack Manifold , Luke Punz
Additional Tags:	Enemies to Lovers , Slow Burn , so slow you'd wanna eat your hand , Fluff and Humor , Fluff and Angst , Internal Conflict , Mutual Pining , Implied Sexual Content , Anxiety Disorder , Alternate Universe - College/University , Football Soccer , Alternate Universe - Marching Band , Theater - Freeform , BAMF GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) , Jock Clay Dream (Video Blogging RPF) , Angst with a Happy Ending , Bisexual Clay Dream (Video Blogging RPF) , set in 1990s , no beta we die like dream's heterosexuality
Language:	English
Collections:	Collection of my Favourite Fics , MCYT , Good Reads , Fics I've read , babababa , fin dteam fics , Literally my favorites
Stats:	Published: 2021-02-11 Completed: 2021-11-30 Chapters: 23/23 Words: 62407

Acts Of Love

by [overthejune](#)

Summary

He leaned down and smiled sensually. "Your name would be nice."

The brunet seemed to consider this for a moment, then leaned forward until their faces were inches apart; a direct challenge. Clay could feel the boy's breath softly ghosting onto his face.

"George Davidson."

Clay's smile grew as he tallied himself a point. "Well, my name is Clay Dream. It's very nice to meet you, George."

George stared straight into his eyes, a light going off in them that signaled his intense disapproval of Clay's condescending tone. The boy leaned back in his seat but didn't relax. After a single moment, the dark eyes discarded him.

"Wish I could say the same."

--

Everyone loves Clay... everyone, that is, except for the sarcastic, edgy guy in the third row of Clay's English Language class.

Clay has always enjoyed a challenge, but he never thought that it would be so hard to get someone to notice him.

George has always enjoyed staying away from people like Clay, but he never thought that it would be so hard to ignore him.

It will be quite a battle of the wills (or pills), and it will change their lives forever.

Notes

Do you ever get those random bursts of ideas in the middle of the night and a sudden motivation to just get on with it *right then*?

I got the burst to write a theater fic at 2 am studying for my English exam and watching the "will you be my valentine" dnf stream :P

I am in love with the idea and very excited for you guys to read it!

Modest and Exasperated

Chapter Summary

Dream wins the game but not everybody's heart

Chapter Notes

Prologue

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Clay Dream is taking it in; the goalie is moving out to meet him; he takes the shot...score! 3-2 Minnesota!"

The announcer's voice pierced the roar of the crowd and Clay Dream pumped his tendon-laced arms in triumph as his maroon-and-gold-clad teammates streaked towards him. The whistle blew, the game was over. Clay felt a lurch in his stomach as he was hoisted up onto the shoulders of his team, but he didn't let the uncomfortable feeling strain his thousand-watt soccer-star grin. He never did.

The star looked up at the grandstands, the blinding lights reflecting on the torn-up watery mud of the soccer field. Eight thousand fans screamed his name and he pointed at a particularly vocal section, then the next as they reacted favorably to his recognition of them.

"Damn it, man," huffed Jack Beluche from somewhere below him and to his right, "You could give those fans the bird right now and they'd still love you."

Clay smirked to himself at the thought as he gathered his gear on the sidelines. The other team had long since vacated the premises in favor of their bus, and the fans were filing out slowly, though some were still looking back for glimpses of their hero. The first strains of *Hail! Minnesota*—courtesy of the ever-present pep band—echoed throughout the bleachers, and a few more sentimental members of the team hummed along as they packed up. Clay shouldered his team jacket and turned to begin his trek back to the team locker room, waving to the stands as he went.

"Clay!" He turned, dirty blonde curls dripping and hanging in his face, and Coach Taggart was indicating a camera a meter in front of his heavy-jowled face. "ESPN!"

The poised sports reporter smiled serenely for the camera; her gaffer was less polite, sending an impatient look his way. Clay smiled brilliantly. This was his favorite part; getting on the television after a successful game... and ever since he'd joined the maroon and gold, they'd had nothing but success. He was the best college soccer player that Minnesota had ever had, and he knew it. Clay started towards the cameraman and his coach.

George Davidson winced as his trombone made contact with another blue bleacher chair. He lifted the horn to inspect the damage as the members of his pep band negotiated their way out of the stadium and noted yet another little blue ding in the soft rose gold. He closed his eyes and wished that he was already back in his single room, doing something useful. It wasn't that soccer matches were ever boring; it was just that it had been such a long week.

Karl Jacobs poked him in the back and gestured to the Trom, a large live-feed screen employed to show the players in action for those fans who couldn't see well enough from their seats. A handsome, jade-eyed young man flashed a dazzling smile at the camera as the sports reporter asked him to describe how he had felt right before he had scored the winning goal.

"Just great, really great, you know?" Clay's amplified voice rang out over the remnants of the crowd, which stopped moving for a moment to watch the interview, much to George's chagrin. "I was looking at the positions of the defenders and I thought, if I could just get the ball, I could maybe get between two of them and have a shot at it. Will passed it to me, and the rest is history," he finished modestly.

Karl snorted and George turned back to the stairs.

"Modest Clay is at it again," Karl grumbled, lifting his horn over the head of a small boy whose Dream jersey nearly drowned his diminutive frame. The boy looked after them, big brown eyes reproachful, as if he realized that they were mocking his hero.

The worst thing about Clay Dream, George thought to himself as he stepped gingerly down the narrow concrete stairs, was not that he was such a pretty-boy, though that was sort of irksome. It wasn't that he thought he was the biggest kid in the candy store, though that was also annoying. It wasn't that he was talented, or that he was famous, or that everything good gravitated toward him. It was that he was, plainly stated, a real ass. No matter what the kid did, he always came across that way, and George couldn't stand people like that, especially when they didn't care that they were perceived in such a manner.

The trash-littered concessions area was also wired to the Trom, and fans covered their ears as ESPN continued coverage at a volume louder than necessary. Dream's voice droned on and on, and George pulled at his maroon-and-gold striped pep band polo in mounting exasperation as he placed his trombone carefully into its case. The blue paint from the chair was even more evident in this lighting, and he sighed as he latched the case closed.

The brunette wrinkled his nose in exasperation as he left the uniform room of the stadium. The crowd was bottled up at the entrance; it would take forever to get out. He joined the queue and looked up at a suspended television. Modest Clay was still on; the television showed him signing autographs with a small smirk etched into his strong jawline.

Sensing the camera was still on him, Dream reenacted one of his earlier goals, much to the delight of the admirers in his wake.

George tried not to roll his eyes, picked up his trombone case with newfound determination, and wormed his way through the crowd to a less popular staff exit. The security guard at the door noted his band polo and stepped to the side. As Dream's voice tracked and followed him out the doors, George wondered if there was anything more degrading — or annoying — than being forced by the Athletics Department to play for the soccer star. After a moment's speculation, he knew there was.

The most annoying Dream-related thing in the world would be if he, George, had to take a class with the soccer star. Fortunately, George thought as he stepped out into the blistering wind, that particular scenario wasn't likely to occur any time soon.

Chapter End Notes

So yah.

Following chapters will be longer

Leave a comment and a kudos :]

Criticism and suggestions are always welcome

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The English Class

Chapter Summary

George's luck is not in his favor and Clay is intrigued by the edgy, sharp-tongued boy in his class

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Nothing, George thought to himself as he pulled out his notebook and labeled it one to twenty, *nothing* in his life was fair.

The first week of the second semester had been cruel, but today was by far the worst. He'd submitted to marching practice every day from 3:30 to 6:00. He'd taken it in stride when his Introduction to Playwriting professor had decided that each of his students was to not only write a script for a final grade but that the honors credit requirement for his class was a part of one of the Theater Club's popular plays. He'd resigned himself to the massive amounts of homework sprawled out on his desk in his single room back in Comstock Hall. But this... this was beyond bad.

He had chosen a seat right up against the window on the right-hand side of the classroom, halfway across the room from the professor. He'd never really liked getting close to his teachers. He never would. They were the bosses at a job and nothing more to him. He didn't feel the need to come in early and converse with them, as a few students in every class seemed to. He didn't feel the need to make them learn his name, nor his face. Most of the time he wished that they would simply teach and ignore him. The only instructor who had ever transcended this view was Mr. Cavoti, who had introduced him to the world of theater when he had been in high school. And so he picked the most unobtrusive spot in the classroom and waited for class to start.

Idly, George had rubbed at a spot in his black jacket and sat there in silence as the rest of the class introduced themselves to each other. A neutral sort of boy, Callahan Brathwaite, had shaken his hand earlier and now sat behind him. They had both looked up in surprise as the door to the thirty-person classroom had opened with a loud bang, and a loud chatter filled the air. George had to clench his jaw to keep it from hitting the top of his desk as the last person he'd ever expected to see in his class entered the room with a flourish.

No way...

Clay Dream had never wanted to take English Language and Society. His major was Business and Marketing, and felt that this class—fulfilling only one liberal education requirement—was a waste of his time. He'd never liked to read, and never about society. However, he was going to try his best in the situation.

A few of his friends followed him to the room, though it meant that they'd be late for their classes. This never seemed to bother them, and Clay never told them to get to class. What was the point? A giggling raven clung to the heavily decorated arm of his letter jacket and he smirked down at her as he banged the door to the English classroom open loudly.

It was the worst thing that could have happened to cap off the already excruciating week. George

dropped his face into his hands, completely stunned by his poor luck.

I jinxed it, he thought miserably as Clay Dream stepped into the room and the heads of his classmates whipped around to take in the sight of the handsome soccer star—as if they were theater puppets, heads controlled by rope. *At that soccer game last night I thought it would be the worst thing in the world to have him in my class, and Fate took the bait! I tempted Fate!*

George supposed he had to look up sometime. He took a deep breath and, running his hand through his dark brown hair, he straightened up.

Immediately, he wished he'd stayed in his reclined position. Dream had chosen a desk front and center to the professor's desk, no doubt so that the instructor would see *him* first as he scanned the room. Dream's fan club was gathered about him, strewn over the desks in a horseshoe shape around the star. Never mind that there were people who were registered for the class currently without seats; where Clay Dream went, his fan club went, and no regular student had enough social clout to demand that they move. Not that they would anyway; everyone would be so star-shocked to even think about finding a seat in this classroom.

Indeed, all of the students who'd had their seats taken by the beautiful boys and girls of the Dream Club didn't seem to mind. They were either completely silent and staring or tittering at the person next to them, seemingly unable to grasp the fact that the soccer star was in their class. Clay Dream was not just a sports headliner at the U of M. He was the King of the campus.

As George watched, a shy brunette with glasses—obviously a wallflower with a sudden burst of courage — wove her way through the desks and up to Dream. Her voice was small.

"Can I... can I have your autograph?"

"Sure, pretty lady!" George recognized the tenor voice from the television screens at the soccer game, and he noted that even though Dream's voice was no longer mechanically amplified, it seemed not to have decreased in volume. The girl giggled and blushed as her hero talked her up, signing her maroon t-shirt. She'd never wash that shirt again.

"So, sweetheart, how'd you like to join us at the Shout House this Friday? It's a real blast: Great booze, sexy chicks, hot bartenders," Dream winked at her.

The girl could only gape at him for a moment, mental fuses completely blown, but quickly covered it up and accepted the invitation. As she made her way back to her seat in front of George, however, she missed the wink that Dream sneaked behind her back to his friends, who snickered.

Disgusted, George fished in his backpack for his book and buried his nose in it. Jocks were jocks, after all, and the bigger they were, the more invincible they acted. The only way to injure them was to ignore them.

Clay's day was improving. He'd arrived on time—a rare achievement—and added at least ten people in the classroom to his ever-expanding fan base. He'd signed two autographs and recounted his goal from the night before three times. Clay leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head, feeling satisfied with himself.

A good friend of his, Alex Quackity, was still making lovesick faces at the girl whose shirt he'd

just signed. The girl didn't notice—she was too busy blushing and looking at her desk. The poor thing would probably never get over it. He laughed at the thought and Alex, thinking it was his face that did the trick, had the good graces to look embarrassed.

Clay pushed up the worn sleeve of his letter jacket to check the gleaming silver Rolex he'd received for his nineteenth birthday. He was twenty minutes early. His friends were busy talking to each other, and so, bored, he looked around the room. He now knew the name of everyone in the classroom. He had quite a memory for names and he used it to his fullest advantage. Lazily his jade eyes tracked the rising dust of the room as the sun shot abruptly through a patch of clouds and burst through the window.

A faint growl of annoyance reached his ears. No one else seemed to notice, but that wasn't unusual—Clay's hearing was better than most.

The soccer star craned his neck in amusement, looking for the source of the sound. A perfectly arched eyebrow lifted as he found it—backlit by a tall window on the right-hand side of the room was a boy, noticeably attractive even from this distance, wearing a black jacket and shielding the side of his face from the blinding rays of light. His book was cradled in a long-fingered hand, eyes closed in a grimace.

A surge of aggravation overlapped the swooping hormonal feeling in Clay's stomach, and he sighed. He'd missed someone. How? Even the guy who was now sitting behind Black Jacket had come up to him and quietly introduced himself. Clay glanced at his friends, who were too busy clowning around to notice anything else. He stood up.

The sun was an invader of the worst kind, and he couldn't seem to get away from its rays, no matter which way he turned. George growled in faint annoyance and lifted his hand to cup his temple, grimacing. It wouldn't be so bad if it hadn't just rained in a freak fall storm. The wet concrete outside was reflecting all of the sun's glory.

George twisted to the side and hunched back down, tucking his chin to his chest and peering at the book in his hands. An oblong shadow fell over his desk, perforating his concentration. He ignored it; its owner probably wasn't looking for him anyway, and if they were, they could just—
"Ahem."

—get his attention somehow. George gave up on the book and looked up. For the second time already that day, he regretted his curiosity.

Clay Dream stood over him, fashionable, modern, beautiful; knowing full well that he fit all of those descriptions perfectly. His lips were parted in a slightly listing grin, cocky, waiting for his pristine presence to work its effect on what he must have considered the lower social life form below him.

George locked gazes with him deliberately, projecting confidence, wondering what to say. Dream cottoned onto the staring contest, and George laughed to himself. He knew he could win any staring contest. He'd once stared down a goat at the county fair on a dare, and he'd won. The goat hadn't looked happy again until a little girl fed it a carrot. Dream would crack in the same way, and it would be funny to see what he would have to say for himself.

What was it about him that everybody found so damn attractive? Sure, George agreed that Dream's

emerald eyes were nice enough, but the rest of him was pretty normal. He was probably a head taller than George himself and was no doubt moderately built, but then again, most guys these days were. His dirty blonde hair had a strangely unnatural look to it; more blonde on the ends than in the roots; dyed. George hated it when guys dyed their hair, especially when it was a nice color to begin with. White teeth, strong jaw and nose, nothing particularly unusual or exotic. All in all, Clay Dream looked fairly normal.

The boy in question put his hands on either side of George's desk and leaned down, grin deepening, and suddenly, George was annoyed instead of amused. He twitched involuntarily, like a cat about to spring.

"What?"

Clay reared back slightly in surprise at the British accent, hands leaving the desk, falling onto his hips. He considered his next move. Rarely was a person unhappy to see him, and it seemed like this boy was, at best, unhappy to see him. He gazed down on the young man in imperious surprise.

"What, what?" he returned.

The boy stared at him with incredulity written into every line. Clay had to admit that his initial perception of the boy as attractive had been correct. Though the slightly bowed, thin lips were currently pursed with something resembling annoyance; though the dark brown eyes were currently hardened with something that looked like disdain; though everything about the other guy's attire screamed 'not impressed' from the black jacket to the faded jeans that he could already tell were fitting so well; though Clay Dream was suddenly feeling somewhat smaller than he'd felt in a while, it was a thrilling feeling and he was slowly getting interested in the conversation.

The boy raised his eyebrows and looked at him like he was insane, raising his dark eyebrows for a moment before dropping them again.

"What do you want?" It wasn't a question, really; more of a statement of disinterest; a test to see how far Clay would push this situation when he wasn't automatically winning. The soccer player suddenly envisioned himself on a chessboard. He couldn't back out now, and he didn't want to: By now it seemed that the entire room was listening to the conversation, and Clay was in his element, performing for the crowd.

He leaned down and smiled sensually. "Your name would be nice."

The brunette seemed to consider this for a moment, then leaned forward until their faces were inches apart; a direct challenge. Clay could feel the boy's breath softly ghosting onto his face.

"George Davidson."

Clay's smile grew as he tallied himself a point. "Well, my name is Clay Dream. It's very nice to meet you, George."

'George' stared straight into his eyes, a light going off in them that signaled his intense disapproval of Clay's condescending tone. The boy leaned back in his seat but didn't relax. After a single moment, the dark eyes discarded him.

"Wish I could say the same."

There was sudden and resounding laughter throughout the classroom as Clay reared back for the second time that day, his eyebrows nearly lifting off his face. George gave him one last cold look and returned to his book. Clay recovered himself and made his way back to his friends.

Alex Quackity clapped him on the arm and let loose another string of laughter. "Man, you just got *owned*."

Clay took out his books and lifted his nose into the air, feigning perfect disinterest. "I am *owned* by *no one*, Mr. Quackity."

As the professor entered the room and ordered them to number a blank piece of paper one to twenty, however, Clay couldn't help but privately agree.

Chapter End Notes

So yah.

Next chapter soon :)

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Smiles and Stares

Chapter Summary

Clay seems to not get George out of his head and the other boy gets an idea for his play

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Clay Dream rolled over in his bed with a frustrated sigh. He was a sound sleeper only when nothing else was on his mind, and tonight his thoughts were as subtle as the university marching band.

Through physics and French he'd ruminate over his failure to befriend the brunette in his English Language lecture, while his friends masked their giggles at his irritation to and from each class. So focused was he on dissecting the morning's events that he hadn't heard Mlle Barclay call on him for a verb chart demonstration; his attention had only been brought back to the present by the yard of metered wood that had snapped sharply over his desk.

Clay made a soft 'hrmph' and punished his pillow with a sharp slap. He couldn't get comfortable; his physical form was mirroring his mental discomfort. He lay there and stared at the mottled white ceiling for two seconds, then reached back and fluffed up the pillow again.

His roommate, Nick, shifted irritably in the lofted bed above him.

"Dream, I swear if you don't stop moving in the next thirty seconds I'm going to come down there and beat your ass!"

Clay pulled a face at the boards of the Gopher halfback's loft and closed his eyes in frustration. He should be *asleep* right now. After all, it wasn't like George's coolness really mattered to him. It was just the one guy, and it wasn't the first time he'd been spoken to like that. The best thing to do was ignore him and carry on like normal. It had worked before, it would work now. *Right?* He smiled to himself, and let his eyelids close.

Two heartbeats later, Clay shot up in bed again and eyeballed his lamp wrathfully. *Wrong.* How dare George speak to him like that when all he was trying to do was be friendly? Well, okay. Clay admitted that he had originally intended to persuade George to, as the phrase was so commonly put, 'join his fanclub'. After all, the guy was nice-looking - anyone with eyes couldn't deny that. Undoubtedly Clay had been sizing the other boy up.

Clay stilled. *A crush?* Two lines divided the space between his eyebrows, perfect medians. Then: *Nah.* He laughed to himself and turned over. Clay hadn't had a real crush since tenth grade, and besides, a single (rather one-sided) conversation wasn't enough grounding for even the basest of attractions. Conclusively, Clay had simply been working the angles like he did for everyone.

George, however, had apparently disliked him on sight... or, Clay considered, maybe on reputation. Yet what had he done to deserve it? *Nothing!* He felt that he hadn't come on too strong.

Sure, he'd been confident, but most people liked that in him. He had been confident, he'd been sexy,

he'd been poised... he'd done everything right. With one more unhappy sigh of annoyance, and a warning creak from his roommate's bed, Clay vowed that he'd win the guy over tomorrow.

After all, he thought with a jaw-cracking yawn, who can resist me when I really turn on the charm?

George tapped his pencil severely on the wooden desk in front of him. A blank piece of paper stared back at him defiantly, daring him to try and put ideas on it. He sighed and leaned back, not up to the challenge. Pops erupted up and down his spinal column as he stretched. He was the first person in the classroom, as he was with all of his classes.

It was a nervous habit of his, arriving before any of his peers—he hated to be the object of even the most passing scrutiny as he made his way to his desk.

Turning his head, he looked around the room for inspiration. Nothing. The blank dark paneled walls hid no plotlines; the rickety professor's desk yielded no main characters. The dead fluorescent light above him smothered any prose it gazed upon.

George shoved his pencil back into his backpack in frustration, and covered his eyes with his hands momentarily. By the end of the week he and his peers in the Introduction to Playwriting class had to come up with the main idea of their thesis play. George had no idea what he wanted to write about. He'd dreamed about writing his own play for a long time, but each attempt had ended up in the wastebasket in the band room of his high school.

Now, though. Now he needed some inspiration.

His gaze fell on the desk in the front and center of the room and he felt a resurfacing of yesterday's disbelief uncurl in his gut. Maybe he should write a farce about popular jocks, he thought with a short laugh. The smile began to slowly straighten out as he stared at the desk, the sudden thought unfurling in his brain like flags in the wind.

He could work with that. He snorted lightly at the idea but couldn't take his eyes off the desk. *I can't be seriously considering making a play about Clay Dream.*

How about a play about the people who surround Dream? His brain questioned. The ones whisper excitedly to their friends every time he passes them? Those who drop their homework and subsequently their grades every time he needs a posse to go clubbing with. Those people who hang around him 24/7 in hopes that they'll happen to be next to him when he next gets his picture taken. The ones he pretends to know, but really probably doesn't even see clearly in his mind's eye. What about a play based on them?

George's pencil found its way back into his hand and began tapping slowly on the desk. A sudden image jumped into his mind: The door to the classroom banging open, the heads of twenty-nine students whipping around in unison as a god walked through the door.

The pencil tapped faster. The scene faded to a bare stage. Ten actors wearing white masks grew out of the stage. Hooks were embedded in the foreheads of the masks, attached to long crimson ribbons that connected to long two-by-fours hanging a foot from the stage ceiling. The boards were nailed together to mimic a puppeteer's marionette controls. There was a flash of light, colored smoke, a large *bang!* The marionette board jerked; each of the ten white faces wrenched around to stare in

awe, stage left! A brightly colored figure wearing an elaborate mask.

Writing appeared on the previously blank page. The stage was set. The colorful new arrival hit his mark and paused dramatically. The audience held its breath. The actor in the colored suit opened his mouth and a baritone voice rang out emphatically –

"Oh my *God*, Clay! You are *so* funny! Isn't he funny?"

George stared down at his page in surprise. Why was the actor saying that? Looking around at the once-empty classroom, he realized that he'd simply transcribed the words of a tow-haired, cow-eyed girl four paces to his left. Reality came rushing back and he winced as the real world intruded on his idea.

Making his way to the seat at the front of the class was none other than Clay Dream, followed closely by his troupe. George managed a passing glare in their direction and erased the last line of the screenplay. He'd rather not include a high-pitched gawking female in the first act. She could come in later, if necessary. Her real-life counterpart gave forth another gale of laughter, and George counted backwards from ten before rubbing the eraser so thoroughly over the paper that it ripped. *No girly stuff in this play; I'd never survive the production.*

Dream slid into his desk with natural athletic grace. His fangclub pooled around him before dispersing throughout the room. George attempted to block out their individual conversations by pulling out his book and attempting to read it with his fingers stuffed in his ears, but found that he couldn't turn the pages that way.

Sighing perhaps a bit overdramatically, he pulled his fingers out of his ears and shut the novel regretfully. He bent sideways at the waist and stuffed it back into his backpack again. A pair of jeans came into his peripheral vision, then stopped just in front of his backpack. George tugged on the bag to remove it from the path of the legs, and searched for his notebook. The legs didn't move.

George experienced a thrill of premonition, and hoped against hope that they didn't belong to who he thought they did. He narrowed his eyes slightly as a precautionary measure, and straightened up with as much dignity as he could muster.

Curses. Dream leaned against the desk across from him the way models leaned, bracing himself without seeming to need the support. His jade eyes crinkled with the force of the blinding smile that was, apparently, directed at George himself. His blond-highlighted curls were in disarray, and he'd abandoned the letter jacket from yesterday in favor of his away-game soccer jersey.

"Hey," Clay said simply.

George remained unimpressed. It was obvious that yesterday's direct antagonism hadn't stung Dream enough to make the idiot leave him alone. In a particularly non-verbose mood, George opted for a change in tactic: He would react to Dream's presence only with complete and utter indifference.

"Hi," he said coolly, before returning his attention to the search for his notebook.

Locating it, he flipped to the second page and began going over his homework again. The form in his peripheral vision didn't move. George waited it out for perhaps twenty seconds. Dream shifted very slightly. George caught a glimpse of the sly grin on the other boy's lips. He sighed, put down his pencil, and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"Look, can I help you with something?"

"Look, can I help you with something?"

Clay's smile bloomed, and he awarded himself points for making contact. "I think so. See, we got off to kind of a rough start yesterday."

The brunette raised his thinly arched eyebrows. "At least you have a decent grip on the obvious."

Clay stared at him in indignation—*An insult already?*—though his well-trained smile only faltered a little. George favored him with a level gaze.

"Right, right," Clay muttered, feeling slightly off-balance. "So..."

Mercifully, George broke through the pause in the conversation. "Did you just come over here to let me in on that little secret, or did you want something?"

Clay started out of his indignation. "Yeah, I did want something." The soccer star leaned down and relaxed, putting all of the charm he could muster into his thousand-watt smile.

"I want *you* to call me Clay."

George gave him an even, oddly quelling stare, then closed his notebook very deliberately.

"Go away, Clay."

Clay stared down in disbelief. George plucked a novel from his backpack and opened it. Clay wheeled about on his heel and marched back to his desk, missing completely the spark of victory that erupted behind George's brown eyes.

Chapter End Notes

So yah

Leave a comment :)

Criticism and suggestions are always welcome!

Interlude: Pitfalls

Chapter Notes

This is an interlude. The characters do not interact in this chapter tho it is kind of important for George's backstory. OKAY, enough spoilers.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Act I, Scene I

Blank stage. No backdrop: Blackout. Four beats after curtain rises, bump downlights to full. Ten actors all draped in black wear white masks with drooping, sad eyes and sagging, wide, miserable frowns. Large chain hooks are embedded in the forehead of each of the masks. Crimson ribbons attach the actors to an enormous marionette's control hanging from the ceiling. They stare out into the crowd, directionless.

Stage left; flash of lights, purple smoke, timpani roars. The lead appears; an actor decked out in a brightly colored costume and a severe mask. The marionette control jerks wildly; the strings pull taut and the actor's heads are wrenched towards the bright actor in unison.

The lead gestures in a sweeping arc motion across the stage. At his sign, the strings are cut loose from the marionette control and the actors crumple to the ground. Cue blackout.

End of Scene I.

George sighed and dropped his pencil on the faded blue-checked bedspread. Writing out the first scene of his assigned homework had helped him forget about his strange afternoon...for about fifteen minutes. It was simply no use.

He gazed around the room, distracted. Screenplays and other homework lay strewn across the floor, while his scratch paper from yesterday's class and the nicer version of his new play lay in front of him on his bed. The pencil rolled off the bed as George shifted; he grumbled and bent down over the side to pick it up.

As he grabbed it, his eyes fell upon the current issue of the Minnesota Daily, the campus newspaper. He brought it up with him, intent on reading Dr. Date's column before he got back to his play. A flash of maroon and gold on the front page caught his eye, and he unfolded the paper to have a look.

Dream Leads Team to 2-1 OT Victory over Badgers. Below the large-font headline was a close-up of Dream himself, mud-splattered and beautiful, triumphantly pumping the air with his upraised fists as his teammates mobbed him. George stared at the paper in disbelief before hurling the whole thing at his closet door. The paper collided with the plastic and drooped miserably to the floor. George covered his face in his hands and sighed.

This is already out of hand.

He had hoped that his first day of the semester would be an uneventful one, but now all he could hope for was that Dream would lose his inexplicable interest quickly. George wasn't keen on the

idea of Dream flirting with him. It made him uncomfortable; making old questions and feelings pull at his mind and heart. Instinctively, he sought to avoid Dream's persistent—albeit probably harmless—flirtation. *Maybe he'll take the hint.*

He took a deep breath and let it out again. If only he could say that to the star's face. He'd gone out with a jock once. As soon as the guy had found someone more interesting, however, George had been unceremoniously dumped. One minute, happy and supposedly in love, the next... He'd felt like a wet newspaper, out of date, obsolete, discarded in the rain. He'd vowed then to never let it happen again.

Since that day, he'd kept his vow, though the initial sharp bitterness had faded from his mind, leaving behind a simple throbbing caution. He hadn't dated since. At first, it was as if he was wrapped in Saran Wrap—an invisible but very present layer of *something* lay between himself and potential significant others. After the hurt had mostly subsided, he'd simply been too busy to date, too busy with the theater. George's pen stilled as his line of thought reached a surprising conclusion. *Has it really been four years?* It sounded right.

George paused with his hand on an old play, remembering that he had spent that one horrible day crying in a little-used hallway off the side of the school, until he heard the voice of the custodian coming his way. He'd scrambled through a black door marked simply with a 4 and ended up in the backstage area, where he'd never been before. He sat with his knees in his chest, shivering beside a boom light rig in the inky blackness until the stage director and drama teacher, Mr. Cavoti, had found him.

A small smile stole freely over George's face as he remembered the concerned look on the old man's face. George had told him what was wrong between sniffles, and the old man had nodded wisely. He'd told the high schooler that love was a game of pitfalls, and that he had to be quick and bold not to fall too hard. He had decided that George should help him set up the stage for that night's rehearsal to take his mind off the situation.

Looking back on it, George privately felt that this might have an equal amount to do with the mysterious absence of that day's stage manager.

His less-cynical past self had gladly complied, and from that night on had been part of the theater scene. He'd grown from a scenery hand into a chorus role, then into a speaking part before finally summoning the courage to take a leading role. He had become popular in the way that drama stars in high school are popular, which meant simply that he was no longer invisible and no longer bullied.

It was, nevertheless, an empowering feeling, to become something more than simply a soccer player's sloppy seconds.

George shook his head, coming out of his memories. He pulled his play paper back towards him. *And that, Clay Dream, is a problem for you.*

Rain slid down the grimy window of Nicholson Hall, and Clay slid lower in his seat along with the silver droplets. Mademoiselle Barclay's nasal voice droned on and on, and the pages of *Introduction to French* in front of him blurred and refocused. Clay rested his forehead on the palm of his hand and gave into the soothing roll of thunder in the distance. His jade eyes filmed over.

Clay's mind rambled from subject to subject. He made a mental note to check if Liverpool had beat Arsenal in soccer last night. He wondered why the feisty sophomore in his English class disliked him so much. He mused that French had probably been the wrong thing to try to fit into his already over-packed schedule, especially since he couldn't seem to pay attention to a single lecture. He wished George would just get over it, whatever *it* was, and be pleasant. He decided that he hated Mlle Barclay's gray curls—she'd look better with shorter hair. He speculated on what a smiling George might look like.

The last thought was so consuming that he was brought out of his reverie. Why was he doing all of this thinking about George? Surely he wasn't *still* upset by the other's indifference. After all, he reasoned with himself, there were plenty of other fish in the sea, and they were much easier catches.

Still, though...still. He hadn't really put the Dream charms through their paces yet. He'd had lots of practice... and he had such an intriguing subject.

Clay couldn't help but smile into his hand as the snippy sophomore's vision floated unbidden behind his eyes. He'd felt a sharp swoop in his stomach yesterday when he'd watched George look up from whatever it was that he was writing. He'd had an expression on his face that was less malicious than usual; he was confused, yes, but not scowling. It had changed his face immeasurably; softening the lines of his bowed mouth, reducing the hardness of his brown eyes, relaxing his jaw just slightly.

The memory of that expression was what was otherwise occupying Clay's attention when Mlle Barclay, who'd been calling him for the last ten seconds, decided to take matters into her own hands. Clay had a vision of brown pumps against the dirty white tile before something cold erupted on the back of his neck. A sharp chemical scent went up into the close air. *Whiteboard cleaner!*

Clay leaped up, choking, and blushed deeply as his classmates dissolved into laughter. Mlle Barclay seemed satisfied with herself.

"Now that I have your attention, Mr. Dream, perhaps you'd like to tell us how to translate 'I will not fall asleep in class'?"

Clay glared as he haltingly translated the sentence, bestowing what he hoped was a quelling stare upon his classmates as Mlle Barclay marched back up to the board.

Murderously gripping his pen, he wondered how she'd translate 'I hope you're retiring soon because you're officially older than dirt'. Deciding that his grade probably couldn't handle such a proposition, his mind altered course.

I wonder how you translate 'Stop being such a jerk-off and let's hang out sometime'? Growling, Clay decided he never wanted to try and use it anyway. He was above George's little mind game.

...I bet George can speak French.

...Crap.

Leave a comment<3

Criticism and suggestions are always welcome!

[twitter](#)

Rainy Day Trombones

Chapter Summary

Irritated George is scary and Clay needs to keep his ego in check

Chapter Notes

Well, well, well...is this an early update we see? ;)

I saw a few comments along the lines of "we want Clay to *respond*" and so, here I deliver.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Clay Dream was irritable for the rest of the weekend. The rain would not let up and the soccer team would not give up the Bierman practice arena, so he was going through serious soccer deprivation. In want of something to do, he hit all the major parties that weekend. Alpha Omega Tau, Kappa Theta Psi, even the dorm party at Centennial Hall. The worst thing about the entire weekend, though, was no matter how many beautiful girls and boys he flirted with at the parties, he wasn't interested in a single one of them.

Clay analyzed the situation over his third mug of black lemonade at the Shout House on Sunday. He was, unusually enough, leaning against a wall away from the action, getting completely wasted as his friends danced, yelled, and had a great time. What was wrong with him? The girls who'd mobbed him as soon as he came in the door had all but disappeared, sensing that for once he wasn't the hot spot of the flirting game. One girl remained attached to him; a shy brunette with glasses that he vaguely remembered inviting to the party the day he met George.

George! Clay stood up so quickly he slopped the alcohol down his shirt and scared the brunette so bad that she squeaked and shrank away from him. Clay didn't notice; his unfocused eyes were observing something else entirely. *That* was what was wrong with him; he was still thinking about that *stupid*, acidic, bitter, sharp-tongued, amazing sophomore. The realization made Clay sway... or perhaps that was just the alcohol.

George. George drove him...he frowned and tried to think of the word. His addled mind came up with a million funny rhymes instead of the phrase he wanted. He vaguely registered the brunette staring at him in consternation, and he gave her an abrupt, toothy smile. She stared at him.

"Clay? Are you...um, alright?"

"George," he replied, still grinning ridiculously.

She glared. "My *name* is Jennifer, Clay. I've been standing next to you all night, you'd think you'd remember my name at least instead of ignoring me. Who the *hell* is George?"

Clay swayed and shook his head, undeterred by her anger. He lifted his mug at her, the motion vaguely resembling a toast.

"*George*," he replied unsteadily, "George isss the straaaangest guy I think I ever met." He hiccupped and stared into space. Jennifer stared at him.

"Is he...a friend of—"

She was cut off by an abrupt burst of laughter. A few patrons of the Shout House turned around to look at Clay as he giggled helplessly, then dismissed him as yet another drunken frat boy. Jennifer thought that the sophomore star didn't remotely resemble his normal, respected self as he held his sides and shook his head from side to side like he wanted to shake his brains right out of his skull.

"No—no, not a friend. He haaaates me!" Clay recovered himself enough to lean forward. Jennifer winced at his alcohol breath. His eyes took on a crazy light and she began to feel a little bit afraid. Mercifully, the soccer star leaned back and stared at the wall above her head, deep in his muzzy thoughts.

"He's like—I 'unno... he's gorgeous but...like...yeah, you know? All bitter 'n nasty...he's like the Ice Man...he givesss me the cold s-s- whatchamacallit." Clay's eyes narrowed. "I don' like it when people ignore meee."

Jennifer edged away, slowly distancing herself from the distracted star. He continued to stare at the wall and mutter as she made for the door of the Shout House. As she stepped outside, giving the soccer player one more glance before she left, she thought that this George must have some kind of nerve to drive Clay this crazy. She wished she'd had it when she'd first met him as well. It would have saved her Sunday.

What was the point of Mondays? George pondered this as he pulled on his dark jeans and his *Guys And Dolls* high school play t-shirt. Also, what was the point of Tuesday through Friday? The rain dribbled grumpily over his window; outside, those who'd had an 8 a.m. class ran for the bus. That was the one thing he had going for this semester; his earliest class started at 9:45. Not that English Language and Society was the greatest way to start off the week.

English Language and Society. The thought made George grind the palms of his hands into his eyes and groan in despair. What maddening scheme would Dream come up with today? *He better not try to stick his tongue in my ear or anything like that.* He wouldn't put it past the stuck-up soccer brat.

If anyone ever tried to stick their tongues in his ear again, George thought he'd either puke or give them a tongue piercing with his pencil. The only person who'd ever done it was Ethan Salvador, the jock who'd dated him and then abandoned him for someone fresher in his sophomore year of high school. That was different though. They'd been in a rather compromised position. On a bed. George hadn't really been protesting at that point, as his attention was focused elsewhere.

George snarled violently. Why was he thinking about Ethan *now*? That made it the second time that week! *Well, just let that be a reminder to you,* he thought grimly. Anyway, it didn't matter, because he would never end up in a bed with Dream, and Dream wasn't *really* likely to stick his tongue in George's ear in the middle of the classroom. Case closed.

With a sigh, George shouldered his backpack and steeled himself to run through the rain.

The hood of Clay's U of M sweatshirt was not keeping the rain out. Streaks of water ran down his nose and down his neck, drenching his shirt. He lowered his head and charged through the doors of Lind Hall. He was sans admirers for the day; he'd left at an unusual time in order to walk to class between the storms. Obviously, he'd misjudged the timing. Everything in Lind Hall was soaked; the stairs were a mass of mud, the hallways were a slip-and-slide fest.

Clay barged into his classroom with his usual vigor and stopped short in surprise. He was the first one in the room. For the entire first week of the semester, George had always beaten him to the classroom. Clay huffed and sat down, drumming his hands idly on the desktop in the silence of the room. The clock stared down at him evilly. Clay glowered back.

His eyes wandered back to George's seat and he checked his watch. It was now twenty after nine, the time that Clay usually made his appearance in the classroom, much to George's obvious despair. The soccer star sat up straighter as a sudden thought struck him. *What if he's sick?* As soon as he thought it, the momentary feeling of panic dissipated and he felt stupid. *Good Lord... Get a grip, Clay! You don't even like this guy. He hates you, you hate him, you only thought about him last night because you were drunk off your ass! Now shut up!*

No sooner had he finished his mental tirade than the door to the classroom swung open. Clay counted to three, then looked back in a lazy fashion to see who it was. *Yesss!* George was closing the door behind him. He looked thoroughly soaked and was cradling a large instrument case protectively. He glared at Clay as the star stifled a laugh.

Clay watched him move around the room to his desk and shake off the black rain jacket. He couldn't help giving the other boy a once-over. *Damn, give me some of that!* He smirked as George flopped down in his desk and pulled out several sheets of paper. He waited until the other was writing furiously before clearing his throat.

George looked up, irritated. Clay smiled at him. George shook his head and went back to work. Five minutes later, the soccer player felt the need to clear his throat again. George's irritation grew.

"Need a cough drop, Dream?"

Clay chose to ignore the question. "You play the trombone?"

George looked up at him scornfully. "Not that it's any of your business."

Clay's smile widened. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"You play the trombone?"

George stared at him like he was a very slow child.

"No," he said, "I carry it around just for the hell of it."

"You in the marching band?"

George gave him an ice-cold look that left no doubt in Clay's mind that he was seriously overstepping his boundaries.

"I like the marching band," Clay continued, "They come to my games and play for me, it's kinda funny. You guys must really like me." He stretched his hands over his head and winked, then jumped as George's textbook slammed shut.

The trombone player's eyes were slanted furiously and Clay couldn't help but shrink away slightly in his seat. George's next words came out in a hiss.

"We come to your *stupid* testosterone fests *only* because the Athletic Department *makes* us. If our presence feeds your colossal ego, that's a tragedy, because *none* of us even like you! You really need to get over yourself!"

They stared each other down in silence. Clay finally broke it.

"You're the stupidest person I've ever met, you know that? You should, by *anyone's* social standards, be *leaping* at the chance to be friends with me! I am seriously practically the *King* of this university, and you just sit there with your stupid book and trombone and whatever it is that you're writing, and you don't even give me a chance!"

"Give you a chance to do *what*?" George's voice was steadily climbing in volume and he lunged forward across his desk in emphasis. "Give you a chance to drag me along to your useless parties? Give myself the chance to be a trophy on your arm as you feel up other people under the table? I'm supposed to give you the chance to tell me you're in love with me, to use me, and then see someone hotter and throw me out without a second thought? I should *give you that chance*? You must think I have no respect for myself! Is *that* what you think?"

Clay's mouth opened and closed like a fish's. George's wrathful gaze was locked fully onto his and he couldn't think of anything to say.

"I'm not in love with you," he heard himself stammer, though he realized that he couldn't meet George's eyes as he said it.

George merely looked at him for a minute. His momentary ferocity was quickly dissipating, and his voice was tight but cold when he spoke next.

"Then leave me alone."

Clay looked at him. George looked back. The door swung open again, and chatter filled the room as the rest of the class filed in. Clay's friends congregated around him, and though he took his eyes off of George, he found that he couldn't think of anything else.

Chapter End Notes

So, thoughts on dumbass Clay?

Criticism and suggestions are welcome as always!
Are you following me on [twitter](#)? You better be >:)

Walk Away

Chapter Summary

Another confrontation strikes; George makes the same argument but this time, Clay fires back

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a little longer than usual, and we see more background for one of the main characters! They both are edging over closer to each other but, let me warn you, it's gonna be a *while* before something happens.

Although...we do have an 'ooh baby' moment to sate your appetites ;)

Enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Act I, Scene 3

Curtains up. Bump blue lights.

Stage right: An actor in a scarlet-colored costume reads a book. He appears disinterested, aloof. He looks up as the boom lights flicker and light the stage completely.

A loud crack heralds the coming of the Bird Man with his flock of sad-eyed, masked actors. They burst onto the scene from stage left, chattering, with blasts of smoke and sound accompanying them.

The Scarlet Man covers his ears and angrily starts to get up to find somewhere else to read. The Bird Man notices the sudden movement; he makes a motion towards the Scarlet Man. The room pauses; the marionette controls jerk the masked actors' heads towards the intruder.

The Bird Man walks forward, hand outstretched, palm up. The Scarlet Man eyeballs him, turns on his heel smartly, and exits stage right. The Bird Man puffs himself up and snaps his fingers. The actor's heads turn back to him and the curtain falls.

Clay Dream had been in love before, only once.

Her name was Sam and she was in the same homeroom as he was in high school. She was pretty in her own way, with grey eyes and short brown hair. It was her personality, however, that Clay had fallen in love with.

She'd apparently been oblivious to her mostly plain looks and the fact that he was the most handsome, sought-after boy in the school. She'd marched right up to him in homeroom and demanded that he help her with her homework.

Clay had to admit that he'd been intrigued at the time. She hadn't understood vectors, but they were able to sort through it together. He remembered how she'd thanked him coolly at the end, her grey eyes amused. She'd packed up her bag and promptly asked him out to dinner at Shakey's. He'd accepted, more out of surprise than real interest, and met her that night for dinner.

They'd gone out for three months. Clay recalled the swooping sensation he'd felt in his stomach region whenever she'd tossed her short bob and smirked at him, or the stupid grin that had come to his face whenever he'd see her in the halls. It was an amazing feeling.

They had split up because she was forced to move to California with her father. Correspondence had lasted for two months, and then they had called it off for good. Clay hadn't regretted the relationship at all. It was the only time he could recall ever being in love, even if it was puppy love.

Clay was *not* in love now. He'd only known George for two weeks. That wasn't enough time to constitute a full head-over-heels googly-eyed love fest. He was merely... intrigued. George challenged him in the same way that Sam had. In some ways, the two were very similar. Neither cared about his popularity; they respected themselves too much to let him control them with it. Sam had never put up with him trying to dominate her. George was too prickly for Clay to even try to manage.

The similarities, however, ended there. Sam had come up to him and demanded that he go out with her, whereas George continually rebuffed Clay's advances. Sam was in love with love; she was fresh in every aspect of it. George obviously had some old baggage from a former relationship; that much was obvious if Clay read between the lines of the tongue-lashing he'd gotten the other day. Sam was confident but sweet; George was dark and angry. They were two vastly different people. Clay couldn't be in love with someone so different from his first love.

It was possible, Clay allowed, that he had a tiny crush on the other boy. He might be minutely interested in what would happen if the two of them dated for a little bit. He seemed only slightly unable to get the trombone player out of his mind whenever he flirted with someone else. It was only nominally annoying.

No, Clay Dream wasn't in love. He had a crush, nothing more. It was something a person with his amount of power shouldn't have. A crush was dangerous to his playboy social life. It was something that he needed to quell, he decided, and nothing more.

Who was he kidding? Clay sat in his uncomfortable plastic chair in English Language and Society and sneaked a glance out of the corner of his eye at the only other occupant of the room.

The sun shone down on George's dark form, making him seem less spiteful and more innocent. It turned his deep brown hair a lighter, gold-flecked color and took the sharp edges away from his face.

Even the black Macbeth shirt he wore seemed more warmly colored in the light. The pencil in George's hand-scrawled rapidly across the paper in front of him. Clay was willing to bet that it was

the same paper he'd been working on the first day of class

Clay's curiosity spiked at the same time as his restlessness. He abruptly shot out of his seat, grabbing his pencil with the intent of sharpening it. The sharpener was, coincidentally enough, right behind George. Clay laughed internally at his genius.

The soccer star put on his best strut as he walked past the other sophomore. George didn't even glance up at him as he passed. Clay felt a surge of irritation but quelled it by reminding himself that he was trying to be unobtrusive. It seemed the best way to stay alive at this point. He inserted his pencil into the sharpener and turned the knob as slowly as he could without arousing suspicion. At the same time, he craned his neck to peek at the piece of paper on George's desk.

The knob of the sharpener turned slower. *It's a play!* Clay stared down in amazement. Dark, spidery handwriting outlined Act I, Scene 5. A character named 'Bird Man' was annoying the secondary character. Apparently, his incessant actions were both repelling and compelling the secondary, 'Scarlet Man', who was trying desperately to ignore him.

Clay forgot about his pencil and leaned forward as more writing appeared on the page. Darkness swathed the stage as the Bird Man grabbed the Scarlet Man and pulled him into a high-speed tango. The two characters battled furiously through the dance, the Bird Man seeking dominance, the Scarlet Man refusing to give it to him. The Bird Man tipped his partner dangerously over his arm and declined to let him back up. They stared each other down –

"What the hell are you doing?" George's voice cut sharply into his concentration and Clay reared back in surprise. He looked down into a pair of irate brown eyes. Rousing himself out of his shock, he indicated the sharpener behind him.

"I was sharpening my pencil."

"For five minutes? Is it made out of titanium or something?"

Clay's anger peaked.

"FINE! I didn't come over here to sharpen my pencil; I came over here to look at what you're writing."

As he said it, he reached around and jerked the paper out of George's grasp; studying it momentarily.

There was a sharp grating sound as George's desk made a trench out of the floor.

Clay looked up in lazy surprise. George stomped the two feet it took to get to the star and grabbed the play back. For once, he seemed too angry to belittle Clay with a scathing insult.

The trombone player turned back to his desk. Clay's anger swooped again, and he dove forward. His hand clamped down around the shorter sophomore's wrist like a vice. George made a strangled sound that seemed halfway between anger and fear as Clay hauled the smaller boy back towards him.

George tried to twist away, but Clay grabbed the other boy's shoulder with his free hand and used it to drag him right up to his face. All movement suddenly ceased and they stood there with only George's harsh breathing to break the silence.

Clay stared down into the other sophomore's eyes. His pupils were dilated in a combination of rage and terror; all Clay could see was brown obsidian. George's breath was coming fast and his shoulder and wrist flexed against Clay's grip, testing it. Clay kept his hands firmly clamped down.

He wasn't about to let George escape now.

George was trapped and both of them knew it. The desk was preventing him from moving backward; Clay's sheer physical superiority kept him from slipping away in any other direction.

There was no leeway for George to fight back; Clay was crushed against him and had both arms pinned. The shorter sophomore's breath came out short and fast; Clay's jade eyes glared into his brown ones from a distance of two inches. George flinched slightly as Clay inclined his head slightly and closed the distance between them another inch. The soccer star's voice came out in an angry growl.

"Why are you such an *ass*?"

George did his best to glare back and get some solidarity back into his voice.

"I could say the same to you!"

"*You're* the one who acts like a goddamned porcupine all the time!"

"Yeah? *You* just don't want to accept that there's one person in the world who doesn't want to kiss your feet! You're the biggest prick I think I've ever met!"

Clay snarled and closed the distance between them until their lips were only centimeters apart. George let out another snarl of fright and tried to struggle backward. Clay stopped him easily and stared into his eyes, the angry glare replaced by a calmer expression.

"I think you want me," his voice came out soft and sure, "I think you want me but you're just too afraid to try me."

George yelped internally. *I don't want him. I don't want him.*

His thoughts were becoming fuzzy and confused even as he tried to use them to defend himself. His resolve slipped away at the feeling of the star's body crashed to his; rock hard muscles perfectly filling the spaces between his own, jade eyes boring into his soul, the soft voice destroying his resolve, assurance of his inherent victory etched into every line of that face as he waited for George to break—wait! *NO!*

With strength boosted by a sudden surge of frustration and mortification, George heaved Clay off of him, sending the star crashing into the desk behind them. George straightened up, readying himself to confront Dream once and for all.

Pain shot through Clay's body as the edge of the desk caught him in the small of his back. He struggled to get up but suddenly found himself pinned back down to the top of the desk by an incensed form.

He looked up and found George's eyes glaring into his. The trombone player was shaking, either in

rage or fear. Clay couldn't tell which it was.

"You–do–*not*–own–me!" Clay could only stare at George in astonishment as each word was hissed into his face. "You–you–you're just like Ethan!"

Clay was abruptly released as George seemed to recover himself slightly. Clay watched him intently as the shorter sophomore took a few steps away, then wheeled around to face the star once more.

"*You*," he said, pointing an accusing index finger at the soccer player, "You go through people like Kleenex. I've seen you do it. Every time you go to a party, you go in with one girl and come out with a different one. It's like your trademark or something. You must have had more one-night stands than the rest of the campus combined! I can't believe that just because you're good at kicking a stupid ball into a net that you can get away with not caring about anyone!"

Clay started to protest but was cut off before he could even get a syllable out.

"Everyone has to conform to your standards, everyone has to meet with your approval! When you have a disagreement with someone, *you don't* change, *they* do! You even go around calling yourself 'the King'! Well, guess what, Your Highness? I won't be used by you, so find yourself another guy to hit on! It won't be hard to find someone else; it seems to be a strength of yours."

Clay found his voice and his temper at the same time. "You *sad*, bitter little person! You can't accuse me of being emotionally stunted when all you do is close yourself off all day! What are *you* contributing to the love scene, huh? Maybe a one-night stand would do you some good!"

George dropped into his chair and covered his face with his hands, completely spent from the argument. His voice was drained.

"Just leave me alone, Dream."

Clay gritted his teeth and forced himself to walk calmly back to his desk. He flopped down and took out his textbook before looking back in George's direction.

He felt an odd pang in his chest at the sight. George's head was resting in his forearms, which were sprawled across the desktop. He looked completely dispirited, and the sun, which had highlighted him so beautifully only minutes before, only served to accent his pain.

Clay's chest clenched strangely and he looked back towards the front of the room. Mercifully, the door opened soon after, and the sun shone brightly on Clay's undamaged conquests as they faithfully surrounded him once again.

Chapter End Notes

SO. Clay is starting to understand why George hates him and his jock friends. It totally went over his head in the last chapter, but my boy is getting there.

I understand that y'all want these two to just make out already. But I'm a sadist and I like watching people suffer so you're gonna have to wait >:)

Also, also! This marks the end of **Act I** (build-up chapters). Things will now begin to get ~interesting~

Follow me on [twitter](#)?

Frustration

Chapter Summary

Clay has a little talk with a friend; George tries to reason with his conflicting feelings

Chapter Notes

...And Sapnap officially enters the storyline!

This chapter has been one of my favs to write so far. There's going to be a LOT of switching of the POVs, mirroring thoughts, and a conversation between the homies ;)

Enjoy!

Non-graphic nsfw warning

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Clay could not escape the guilty feeling in his gut. He knew he'd been in the wrong, as awkward as it was to admit that fact to himself. He'd never really placed himself in the wrong before; sure, he'd admitted blame in order to quell a coach's fury or to soothe his parent's madness. He'd just never really felt bad about his actions at either of those times.

Clay lay on his green-quilted bed, staring at the smoke detector. Train accompanied his thought process in his headphones, and while Clay thought they were a great band, they weren't really offering him any solutions to his immediate problem.

He'd messed up. He knew it. He just had to find some way to make it better again. It was another unfamiliar feeling; the desire to apologize, to make up, and be friends again (or friends, period). In the first place, he'd never made any obvious enemies because of his stardom. And when he'd made those enemies by either accidentally or intentionally hurting them, he had never, *ever* felt the need to kiss and make up.

This was Clay's line of thought when the lock to his room was forced to surrender. His roommate banged into the room, cussing a blue streak at the key in his dark hand. Clay smiled. Halfback Nicholas Brown-Aetos never failed to amuse him; it was one of the many reasons they were such close friends. He was like Alex, Clay thought, but with more self-respect.

Nick looked up and huffed.

"Let's see *you* get in here with this key, white boy."

Clay laughed and looked back up at the ceiling. Nick shrugged off his soccer sweatshirt and backpack, then dropped onto the futon directly across from his reclined roommate. His hazel eyes watched Clay intently.

Since the first week of the semester, Clay had been acting funny, and Nick was determined to get

down to the cause of it all. First Clay had been stomping around the room or sighing at the ceiling in some sort of frustration. Then he'd been increasingly distracted; glowering at the walls and mumbling assertively in his sleep.

Yesterday, however, was something completely different. Nick had been working on his Calculus III homework when Clay had slunk through the door after his English Language class. The boy had looked completely whipped, shame-faced, whatever you wanted to call it. He'd dropped his backpack and crawled right into his bed, pulling the sheets up over his eyes. Nick had decided to give his roommate some space, and Clay had recovered by that evening. The only thing to suggest that something had happened was this new contemplative phase Clay seemed to be going through.

Even now, the soccer player was staring at the ceiling again, lost in thought. When Nick had met him two years ago, he had been shocked to learn that the soccer star was even *capable* of thought. He'd gradually built a bond with the other athlete, however, and they'd become friends.

Nick didn't agree with Clay's lifestyle, but he kept his comments to himself. Nick was not very extroverted, but had a sly sense of humor; he was full of advice but would only dispense it when pressed. Though he speculated that he was probably one of Clay's only true friends, he tried to leave the other sophomore's social life to himself. That was why he hadn't tried to talk to Clay about what was bothering him this semester. Now, though, it seemed time.

Nick threw the futon pillow at the other boy's head.

"Hey, wake up."

Clay grumpily popped an eye open to glare at the halfback.

"Whaddayouwant."

"Wanna talk about it?"

It was funny how quickly Clay could wake up when he wanted to.

"About what?" Clay meant it to sound casual, Nick was sure. It came just short. He spoke clearly and assuredly so that Clay couldn't twist his words and send the conversation down an entirely different route.

"About whatever's causing your strange mood swings. Now I know soccer's not bothering you, and you haven't complained about your classes yet this semester. I just want to tell you that if you want to talk about it, I'm here to listen."

Clay wondered what it was about Nick that allowed him to say something so totally girly, yet also maintain his masculinity at the same time. Perhaps it was his strange sage-like quality; even now, he was cross-legged on the futon, staring at Clay with calm intensity. He looked like a monk. Or Yoda. Clay stifled a giggle at the thought.

Well, what could it hurt? Clay pushed himself off of his pillow and sat Indian-style on his bed. He picked at the forest green fabric as he thought.

"I don't know where to begin," he said sheepishly. Nick lifted a dark eyebrow at the soccer player and decided to make it easier for him.

"Is it about a girl?"

Clay shook his head mutely.

"A boy?"

Clay felt the heat rise to his face. *Damn!*

Clay's sudden blush surprised the halfback. He'd never seen the usually lewd and unselfconscious sophomore so much as bat an eye at love, never mind blush at the mere mention of it. Nick's grin widened, white teeth flashing across his handsome face.

"AHA! So, spill. What's the deal? He not working out for you?"

Clay's face transformed from the embarrassing love-struck face to a deeply mournful expression. It was nearly comical. Nick would have laughed if he hadn't subconsciously grasped the magnitude of the situation. Anyone who could bring that expression to Clay's face was a special person.

Clay sighed again.

"He's very...different."

Nick lifted his eyebrows. "How so?"

"He's...not impressed by me at all."

Nick fought to keep the smile off of his face. He'd known that one day this would happen.

"And...?" he prodded gently.

Clay ended up spilling the entire sad story to his friend, from the cold meeting on the first day of class to the disastrous confrontation last Friday. As he concluded his retelling, he actually seemed ready to cry or to hit something at the very least. Nick pondered in the silence that filled the room. Clay looked up at him intently, obviously praying that he had some godlike advice to give.

Nick sighed and straightened up.

"Clay, man, you made a big fat ass out of yo'self."

Clay's expression became more miserable as Nick confirmed his suspicions.

"I just —" the quarterback stammered, looking surprised at his own words. "I just want to make it better, you know? I never ever wanted to be friends with someone so bad, and I don't understand why I can't even talk to him without fighting."

"Maybe you're trying too hard."

Clay looked grumpy. "Yeah, maybe."

Nick leaned forward. "Know what I'd do?"

"What?" Clay's voice was hopeful.

"I'd go have fun with your buddies tonight, then go talk to *Alyssa* in the morning."

Clay's expression immediately brightened.

"Alyssa! I forgot about her!"

Nick's mouth twitched up at the thought. "You haven't talked to her in a long time, you know."

The blond looked guilty. "Yeah, I know...Do you really think she can help?"

"I *know* she can," Nick said firmly, "She's the Love Doctor, remember?"

Clay laughed at the nickname and agreed. Nick watched him put on his coat and dial-up some of his friends to accompany him to the Shout House.

The halfback picked up his Calculus book once more as Clay's tousled head disappeared behind their door. He picked up his pencil and was about to start problem 53 when the door swung open again. He looked up in surprise.

"Forget somethin'?"

Clay looked uncomfortable and fidgeted in the doorway.

"Yeah, I forgot to say...thanks, man."

Nick's smile drew across his face again.

"Anytime, man. Anytime."

The Shout House was always a riot waiting to happen, and Clay Dream was well known for being the catalyst for that riot. As soon as he walked through the door with his chosen posse of the night, the taps started flowing faster and the floor began to heat up.

Clay intended to get totally smashed, grab some guy, and get right into bed. He swore to get that *stupid* sophomore's face and his own guilty feelings out of his head for the entirety of that night, and at least the first half of tomorrow (he'd reserved that timeslot for holding his head and puking).

After casting an imperious glance over the dance floor, Clay strutted up to the bar and ordered a round of Jell-O shots. The bartender snorted, knowing the effect those shots would have on the King; but hey, if the kid wanted it, he could have it. He'd only be in trouble if the police came, and they never did.

Clay sat down easily on a barstool and surveyed the room for prospective bed buddies for the night.

He was looking for a brunette, preferably with brown eyes. He smirked as his gaze landed on one who was already swaying near the opposite wall. Clay tossed back his shot and stood up.

Act II, Scene I

Curtains up, cue boom lights.

The Bird Man is alone on the stage. He crosses his arms over his chest and looks around

authoritatively. This is his kingdom. He raises his head as a creaking sound appears from Stage Right.

Stage Right: The Scarlet Man appears. He takes one look at the Bird Man and tries to leave again, but the Bird Man rushes forward and grabs him. He slowly turns the Scarlet Man around and holds him calmly by the shoulders. The Scarlet Man stares at him.

There is an eerie chiming in the air as the empty marionette strings sway above their heads. The Bird Man pulls the Scarlet Man closer to him, wrapping his arm around the Scarlet Man's waist and using the other to cradle his cheek. The Scarlet Man is still.

George hissed as the hot water hit him, then relaxed into it. It seemed the only way he could relax these days was to pelt himself with hot liquid. He leaned his head back and soaked his dark brown hair, turning it black. The muscles in his shoulders gradually relaxed, unknitting where the warm water ran over them.

Saturday was a good and a bad day to be in emotional turmoil, George thought as he turned the water temperature up. It was good because it meant that he didn't have to face the object of his frustration. It was bad for the same reason; now he had all weekend to stew about it.

George growled and reached for the water switch. He was willing to bet that Clay Dream, the superstar, had not given their confrontation a single thought since he'd walked out of that room on Friday. How could he expect the star to feel guilty? He was probably having a great time right at that second.

Clay weaved through the swaying bodies and alcoholic beverages as he searched for the brunette he'd seen earlier. He stood on tiptoe to look around a burly man with a goatee, who promptly sprayed smoke at him like an octopus. Clay waved his hand in front of his face in disgust and shot around the man at the first opportunity. He scanned the wall quickly—yes!

The brunette slouched against the wall in an alcoholic daze, hands deep in his pockets. He eyed Clay up and down as the soccer star approached him. Clay mimicked the other's posture and smiled down at him. His were indeed brown eyes. *Thank God.*

"Hey there."

Act II, Scene 3

The Scarlet Man shakes as the Bird Man holds him gently. He puts his hands on the Bird Man's heavily decorated shoulders. The marionette controls jangle warningly and the chimes sound

again, but the Scarlet Man is no longer paying them any heed.

Dim boom lights; cue blue lights. Electric guitar duets with bells. The Bird Man sweeps the Scarlet Man into his arms and they renew their wild tango.

George supposed that he was also at fault. It probably wouldn't have hurt, he reflected as he washed the shampoo from his hair, to have shaken the star's hand on the first day of class and been done with it. Yes, he would have been just another part of Clay Dream's posse, one of many different masked drones. But at least he wouldn't be the object of the soccer star's scorn.

Callahan, the neutral boy who sat behind him in class, had quietly introduced himself to Dream on the first day. He'd ended up on the very outer layer of Dream's fan club, labeled as a hopeless cause who wouldn't go partying with the rest of the club. They'd left him alone from then on.

George grabbed the conditioner bottle in a death grip. *Why couldn't he have just gotten it over with?*

Who was he kidding? He knew it hadn't been an option. From the second he'd laid eyes on the soccer player on the brightly lit field, George had known that it would be disastrous to even look in the other sophomore's direction. It was too much like his first love; the star's personality struck way too close for comfort.

Yes, George knew that being friends with Clay Dream had never been an option. He just wished he could forget why.

The hallway was darkened and smelled of sweat and loam. The brunette moaned into Clay's mouth as the star claimed his tonsils; his hands moved under the soccer player's shirt and ran circles over his nipples. Clay shivered and forced the other man into the wall harder.

The brunette reversed their positions abruptly and managed to get his legs between Clay's. *Mmm, interesting... an aggressive one.* Clay hissed as the other man ground sharply against him and he felt a familiar tightness in his jeans. He grabbed his new friend and pulled him down the hallway to find somewhere more private.

Act II, Scene 4

The Bird Man and the Scarlet Man dance in a wild tango. The pace quickens; the electric guitar dominates the flutes and bells.

The tango is another quest for domination, much like their first dance. The Bird Man is winning. He dips the Scarlet Man and, once again, refuses to let him up. They stare into each other's eyes.

The Scarlet Man tips his head back, acknowledging the Bird Man's win.

After all, George thought, it wasn't like anything would ever happen between them. He didn't want it to happen. He turned the water temperature down. The soap ran in rivers off of his skin.

After all, Clay thought, it wasn't like anything would ever happen between them. He didn't need it to happen. He pushed the nameless brunette down on the mattress as he fumbled for the clasp on his pants. The darkness of the room beat down against his skin.

Act II, Scene 5

The Bird Man pulls the Scarlet Man back up. The warning chimes are silent; the Scarlet Man has ignored his intuition. The marionette controls the flag overhead, but the Bird Man quells them with a look. A sad-eyed masked actor stares out from Stage Right; it's inferred that he was once a Scarlet Man too.

The Bird Man notices the masked actor and shoos him away discreetly.

He exits Stage Left without a sound.

George couldn't stop thinking about him. The water alternately burned and froze his skin; angry red blotches were beginning to appear. He gave a roar of frustration and turned the water all the way on cold.

Clay couldn't stop thinking about him. Even as he worked over his partner, he was imagining a different pair of brown eyes looking up at him, a darker personality melding with his own. He gave a roar of frustration and came.

One day, George thought, it would be resolved, and his heart would break again.

One day, Clay thought, it would be resolved, and his heart would feel something new.

Act II, Scene 6

Cue blue lights. The Bird Man holds the Scarlet Man in his arms after the wild dance. The Scarlet Man pulls away gently, but the Bird Man grabs ahold of him again and pulls him back. This time, the Scarlet Man stays.

They stand there in silence, then the Bird Man reaches towards the Scarlet Man's chest. From underneath the fabric, he pulls out a fist-sized, glowing red prism. It's the Scarlet Man's heart.

Cue red lights. The Bird Man puts the heart in his pocket. The Scarlet Man doesn't move.

Curtain; end of Act II.

Chapter End Notes

WELL THAT WAS A RIDE, HUH

hope you enjoyed!

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The Love Doctor

Chapter Summary

Clay meets with Alyssa and George joins the theater

Chapter Notes

This chapter is more Clay-centric, or rather, more about his talk with Alyssa.

I understand Clay is not well-liked right now. He's not supposed to be a sympathetic character...yet. He's about to go through some ~mysterious~ changes tho, thanks to Cupid ;)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Everything...hurt.

Clay hissed and curled up in a fetal position as the sun sprang through the window and performed a double backflip into his jade eyes. The action made his entire back scream out in surprise, and the soccer star lay there whimpering until the agony subsided.

Where the hell was he? Clay shaded his eyes with his hand before daring to open them again. Blinking the pink dancing spots away, he sat up and looked around. It did the soccer player no good; he still had no idea where he was. Groggily, he checked around the bed in which he was laying. He found his clothes mashed into a pile halfway underneath the headboard.

Glowing, Clay pulled on his clothes and located his watch. *11:43* read the silver hands on his once-gleaming, now stained Rolex. He vowed to clean it off once he got home.

The door to his room for the night opened into a dark, quiet hallway. Snoring resounded from behind the decorated doors of the rooms that lined it. Clay tiptoed to the stairs and silently descended to the first floor. A large plaque greeted him as he found himself in the entryway to the house.

Phi Beta Gamma: 100 years of service to the Community, to the University of Minnesota, and to Our Brothers.

Clay barely stifled an explosive laugh of relief. Half of his soccer brothers belonged to this fraternity; he must have been really out of it not to realize where he was. He turned around and surveyed the area. The once unfamiliar-looking living room winked at him, satisfied with its little joke. Clay winked back and pulled open the door. He'd be in a better state of mind after a shower and some food.

George walked cautiously down the northernmost hallway of the Rarig Center, repeatedly checking a piece of paper in his hand as he did. He let out a silent cheer as the door to 220A loomed in front of him. He raised his hand and knocked three times.

"Come in! Come in!"

The dimly lit room was crowded with theater posters, props, and screenplays. George felt his muscles relax as he entered; it felt just like the backstage area in his high school. Graphics of plays were tattooed across the dark walls and were steadily creeping onto the ceiling. A thin, short old man with wispy white hair energetically waved him into the room and pointed at a chair in front of the cluttered desk.

"Welcome, welcome! You must be George, then? Ah, good! I am Anders Christian, your advisor and the stage director for the University Theater Club. I am happy to see you today!"

George couldn't help but crack a smile at the old man, who seemed to be continuously in motion as he spoke; making standing motions and sitting right back down, banging on odd pots on his desk with his pencil, jerking his head back and forth excitably. His keen dark eyes took in George's appearance and the sophomore was glad that he'd worn the clothes he had; the paint-splattered jeans, black *Guys and Dolls* shirt, and the black leather jacket seemed to blend perfectly with this room.

For the next half hour Anders Christian quizzed George on his knowledge of the theater, past experiences, how he felt about certain plays, and about his choice of major. George felt that they were more often on a tangent than on what they were supposed to be discussing, but he didn't feel the need to complain.

For the first time since his sophomore year began, George began to feel the stirrings of excitement that meant he was about to do something great in the theater. Anders Christian was the key. Now he had to find the lock. Remembering his assignment for Introduction to Playwriting, George decided to derail the *'MacBeth'* train to get some information.

"Ah!" Anders Christian fidgeted excitedly as George made his request, "So you want to be involved with my little theater club! Excellent! Excellent! Yes, you'll fit right in. You've had a strong career already in musicals; I would like you to audition for me for a variety of plays and then we'll see where your strengths lie. I think, personally, that *Quotation Marks* will fit you well, but you never know! You never know. Yes, yes."

George left the room with a considerable pile of audition materials. For the first time since the year began, he couldn't stop smiling. A weight had been lifted off of his shoulders. He was back on the theater scene at last.

Clay sat on a bench facing Northrop Auditorium and let the spring sun warm his face. As the minutes crawled by, his head dropped back. He couldn't prevent his mouth from falling open slightly, nor his jade eyes from closing. It had been a long night, after all.

He was rudely awakened mid-snore by a strange tickling in his throat. The soccer star simultaneously shot upright and sneezed. Glittery dust shimmered all over his shirt and he waved his hands at it as if he could banish it by doing so.

"Alyssa!" he whined. There was mad giggling behind him and he whipped around in his seat to glare at its source.

Alyssa stood behind him with a vial of what she liked to refer to as 'Pixie Dust' but was really just glittery eyeshadow crushed up and mixed with Elmer's glue. She often used it to torment the weary who fell asleep with their mouths open. Clay couldn't believe he'd forgotten about it and had let himself get caught by her. He wiped at his mouth grumpily and indicated the seat next to him with a wave of his hand.

Alyssa plopped down and grinned wickedly at him. Her cheerfully evil green and blue eyes laughed at his predicament from under her platinum blond hair, which was tied back with a colorful gypsy's scarf. A cascade of silver earrings followed the curves of her ears, and another hoop adorned her eyebrow. Today she was wearing a long flowing skirt with at least five animal print patterns on it and an equally unique tank top. She was easily the most mismatched person on campus, and by far the nuttiest person Clay knew.

"Soooo... Nick tells me you have some *boy problems!*" She was also the loudest person he knew.

"Shh!" Clay exclaimed, looking around himself for eavesdroppers. Finding none, he turned back to Alyssa with his severest expression. "He told you that?!"

"Oh, he tells me everything," Alyssa winked at him.

Hmph. Traitor. What happened to the Roommate Bond?

"So," the girl went on, tossing her shiny platinum hair behind her, "Tell Alyssa the Love Doctor what your problem is."

For the second time that weekend, Clay found himself explaining the intricacies of his love life (or lack thereof, in this case) to another person. It wasn't a position he often found himself in, but his discomfort was alleviated by Alyssa's presence. Though she was crazy in temperament, she had earned her nickname well.

Clay finished the story and watched Alyssa as she stared at the Auditorium with her fingers pressed contemplatively to her heavily painted lips.

"...Hm." she said at last. Clay waited impatiently but silently for her to say something more enlightening. He knew better than to rush her. Finally, she broke off her staring contest with the building in front of her and trained her green-blue gaze on him.

"Well, I suppose the fact that you realized you messed up big time was what brought you to me. Therefore, we can skip the 'scolding' process and get right down to it."

Clay breathed out a sigh of relief. Alyssa's scolds were never to be taken lightly, and rarely could he get out of them without feeling about two inches tall.

"So. There are many things going on here, and only about half of them have to do with you, from what I can tell. You sure picked a difficult boy to pursue, I'll give you that."

Clay fidgeted uncomfortably. "So...got any great insights for me?"

"I have great insights for every occasion, you know that."

Clay rolled his eyes. "Right, right."

Alyssa ignored the slight and turned her gaze back to Northrop.

"All right, Clay baby, here's the scoop from the Love Doctor's perspective. Listen good 'cause you can only act on this information once, got it?"

At Clay's vigorous nod of approval, Alyssa explained.

"Let us psychoanalyze the boy from a few angles. Angle one: His general personality. We've already determined that he behaves in a standoffish manner towards you. You also told me that he usually sits by himself in class and doesn't talk much. Though this does indicate that he's introverted, it doesn't mean he's a loner. Therefore, I conclude that it's not people, in general, he's bothered by, it's just you."

Clay groaned. Alyssa rolled her eyes and flicked her Pixie Dust at him.

"Quiet, you. It's tough cookies from your present vantage point, but it means less of an obstacle, later on, believe me. Now then, angle two: We will use what we know of his past to formulate an opinion on why he hates you. Though you have behaved arrogantly to and around him, you do that all the time and it usually doesn't bother most people. Therefore, the Love Doctor speculates that something in his past makes him instinctively avoid you. From what you told me of his outbursts before class, I've decided that he probably had a boyfriend before that acted like you. It was obviously a painful relationship, and he's sworn to never let that happen to him again. He could just be afraid to talk to you. He's afraid of you. He's afraid he might fall for you."

Clay stirred in his seat.

"You—You—You're just like Ethan!"

Alyssa watched him like a hawk out of the corner of her eye as she speculated further.

"Your obviously jockish tendencies evidently annoy him. He is not a mainstream thinker; we can deduce this by his actions and by the aspects of his personality that do not apply to you."

"What?"

"He's a theater major, Clay, it's obvious. Who else would write plays before class when they could be sleeping instead?"

"Ah."

"Right. Now that you've cottoned on to the fact, we can use this information more wisely. Since he is an independent thinker as is indicated by his standoffish nature and his choice of major, we can safely determine that he will not be impressed by the repetition of your previous behaviors. Which means..." She lifted her eyebrows at Clay.

Clay was confused. "I have to...what?"

Alyssa groaned in defeat.

"Clay, you have to *change* your behavior towards him in order to impress him. I also think that not only will you have to change your behavior, but you'll also have to change everything else. Oh,

don't look at me like that. I don't mean everything as in you need to quit soccer and take up chess. I mean that in order to impress him you need to not only start being nicer to him but also to change the way you treat other people, the way you play your sport, the way you handle your life. Let's face it, Clay, you're a playboy who's going nowhere emotionally. Do you want it to stay that way? Then fine, get over this boy and move on with your life. No one will stop you. However, if you are serious about wanting to hook up with your dream man, methinks he won't be impressed by Clay the Playboy. I think maybe Clay the Boy would do better in this situation, instead."

Clay glowered at the grass. "You've wanted to say all that for a long time, haven't you?"

Alyssa laughed. "I admit it. The opportunity just never presented itself before now."

Clay gazed ahead. "So you're saying that I need to reevaluate how I treat people."

Alyssa looked at him owlshly.

"I think you might be surprised, Clay," she said gently, "On how popular you can *really* be. It doesn't take a harsh hand to lead a horse, you know. You can be popular, talented, *and* kind. *That* would impress anyone, including your George."

Clay sat in silence before heaving a great sigh.

"Alyssa, you are the Love Doctor indeed."

Alyssa flicked the Pixie Dust at him again.

"No, silly. I am a psychology major. I just do the love business on the side."

She winked and looked at her watch, then yelped and bolted out of her seat.

"Gotta go, Clay baby. You just think about what I said and do what you will with it. I'm sure you'll make a good choice."

Clay waved as she disappeared around a building, scarves whipping in the wind after her. The bench was occupied for the rest of the afternoon as he thought.

Clay knew that Alyssa was right. She was always right when it came to human emotions, and everything that she'd said had made sense to him. Suddenly, a memory came to the soccer player.

The play that George had been writing had had two characters battling for dominance, and neither was giving in. That way, one of the characters was sure to get hurt. Maybe Alyssa was right. Maybe he needed a different tactic.

There was only one question left to answer:

Is it worth it?

So, thoughts on Alyssa's advice?

Clay is conflicted! George is happy! Wonder what will happen now...

I know the story is moving slowly... Well, it's supposed to! The second Act has only just started ;)

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Interlude Two: Midnight Wanderings

Chapter Notes

Another interlude! Our Dream has some *serious* thinking to do.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The campus was empty and dark. Clay wandered with his head down against the September cold; above him, the trees whipped the half-moon into a vacant white mass with their darkened, leafless tendrils. Usually, he hated the silence of the night, but tonight it was necessary. The soccer player ran a hand over the wall of Northrop Auditorium as he skirted it on his way back to the dorms, flinching when something slimy came into contact with his fingers.

Ew...I don't want to know what that is. He sighed and ventured out of the shadow of the building and into the bright moonlight that illuminated the front steps of the auditorium like a stage. Clay paused with his hand on one of the black metal railings and stared upwards into the night sky. The moon's obelisk gaze looked back at him blankly. The soccer player sighed again and sat on the second stair, contemplating the scene before him.

The 'mall area' lay sprawled out and sleeping before him; an imposing collection of the original university buildings, columns throwing shadows onto the tile walkways, flanking a rectangular park. The dark trees whispered in the wind. At eleven o'clock at night, there was no one wandering the cracked sidewalks. Tonight, Clay preferred it that way.

If he squinted hard enough, the sophomore could see the bench where he'd sat only eight hours previously with Alyssa. He'd been walking ever since, wondering if all that she'd said was true. It was strange to hear someone tell him that he could be more than what he was. Usually, those around him insisted that he had hit the peak of his life; he had everything he could ever want, he was everything he'd ever hoped to be. Was that true?

- Let's face it, Clay, you're a playboy who's going nowhere emotionally. Do you want it to stay that way?

Did he want it to stay that way? Clay had thought he'd liked his life how it was. Was he just missing out on something without knowing it? He kicked at the ground contemplatively.

Eight hours ago, he'd asked himself if it was worth it.

He knew what everyone else looking at his situation would say: Love was always worth it, love would never let him down. That was what they said in the movies; that was the advice that Dr. Date gave in his column in the *Minnesota Daily*.

Those loves, however, had to be different than this one. Movies never had complicated relationships, the kind that made you want to tear out your hair in frustration or spend hours moping on the stairs of an empty auditorium. No one would pay ten dollars to see two people fight

repeatedly and perhaps never even get together. No, movie love was clean and uncomplicated. Movie love was always worth it; the hero always ended up with the girl in the end. There was no uncertainty.

Was it worth it to change all of who he was on the off-chance that he'd impress some guy in his class, a guy he could barely even begin to figure out? It was an awful gamble no matter which way he looked at it.

In truth, Clay had no idea whether it was worth it or not. If he was Harrison Ford in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, he would immediately set foot into the brave new territory of love. As it was, he was just a boy who could kick a ball through a net. He had no great insights into the world of love. He knew next to nothing about his own emotions.

- It doesn't take a harsh hand to lead a horse...You can be popular, talented, and kind. That would impress anyone, including your George.

Clay hoped that Alyssa was right. For now, he had no idea if it was worth it or not. He just had to keep trying, the soccer player thought as he stood up and dusted off his jeans. If it was worth it, he'd know.

The walk from the West Bank Arts Quarter to the East Bank was probably one of George's least favorite things in the world. The long maroon and gold Washington Street Bridge spanned the blackened Mississippi River below from a tremendous height. It was a ten-minute walk from bank to bank if one hurried. George always hurried; every time he crossed the bridge he felt like the water was going to try to pull him in. It was a silly fear, considering that the pedestrian walkway was one hundred feet above the waterline, but George couldn't stop himself from shying away from the railing that overlooked the dark banks of the river.

Stop thinking about it! Think about something else, like the band or the audition. The audition. The thought made the corners of the sophomore's mouth twitch upwards slightly. The auditions for the Theater Club had gone amazingly well. Anders Christian and his assistant stage director, Paul Sharma, had asked him to perform parts of the audition material provided. They'd also asked him to sing from a series of obscure musicals.

It had felt good to use his voice again. He'd been alone on the stage, the bright boom lights focused powerfully on his form as he breezed through the sultry refrain of *Tango For Two*. Anders Christian and Paul Sharma had evaluated him from the fourth row back in the audience's seats.

George had expected them to whisper back and forth throughout his audition, or at least to write comments on the pieces of paper that each held in their hands as he sang. They hadn't. Instead, they'd watched him with intense concentration; Paul's head tilted back and to the left as he thought, Anders cupped his chin in his right hand as his dark eyes evaluated the young actor on the stage.

It hadn't been a bad feeling. He'd felt as if they were stripping away the old, tarnished outer layer of his performing abilities in order to reveal the gleaming promise of what he could be. Indeed, he'd

felt his baritone voice soaring more easily than it ever had, his gestures coming more freely, his heart pounding more rhythmically. After each number, they'd exchanged a single look, a brief nod, and asked him for another song or scene from a different play.

George had shuffled through the audition pile that was resting on a small stool beside him, cleared his throat, and performed for them again... and again... and again.

In the end, the two had motioned for him to come down off the stage and to them. They'd talked lowly to each other as he gathered the audition packets and made his way down the side stairs and through the auditorium. It had taken him that long to finally feel the nervousness that had been steadily building inside of him all night. He'd stopped beside their red cushioned chairs and they'd both looked up at him calmly.

Anders had steeped his hands and rested his chin on them.

"How do you think you did, my boy?"

George was unsure how to respond. He'd rarely heard that question from the director of the stage; the director was always the one who'd told him how he'd done, regardless of how the young actor had felt about his own performance.

"Um..." His feelings of uncertainty had always doubled when he was no longer under the spotlight, and this was no exception. It was a strange reversal of the stagefright that he should have felt, but that was the way it had been since high school. He belonged on the stage.

"...Alright. I think I did alright."

Anders Christian and Paul exchanged an amused look.

"Just 'alright'?" Paul sounded as amused as he looked. George's consternation had redoubled forcefully. His stomach felt like large stones had congregated in it for an emergency meeting of rock kind. He looked back at the stage directors silently.

Anders Christian smiled at him.

"You're a strange boy. A very strange boy indeed."

Paul leaned forward and met the sophomore's eyes. "That was probably the best audition I've ever heard. Anders agrees."

George's stomach clenched again. He looked at them uncomprehendingly. Anders smiled more widely at the young actor's expression.

"We're not joking with you, my young friend. You did very, very well."

George found his voice at last. "R-really?"

The stage directors beamed up at him. "Really," Anders had said softly.

The sophomore had had nothing else to say. He'd just given them the first real smile he'd made all semester. Anders had shooed him away, telling him to come back to his office the next day.

George had simply nodded and walked away, clutching the audition papers to his stomach. He'd peered back at them from the wings of the stage as he exited. Their heads were bent over the paper in the old man's lap, and Anders was scribbling furiously. A warm, swooping sensation had chased the rocks away from his inner organs, and he'd felt truly calm for the first time in years.

George came out of his reverie abruptly. The end of the Washington Street Bridge was in sight. Ahead and to the left, the Science Classroom Office Building loomed. He locked his gaze on it determinedly and doubled his pace. Monday couldn't come quickly enough.

The drowned leaves under Clay's black Nike shoes made a vague, sloshing noise as the star hurried back towards Centennial Hall. The light of the Washington Street Bridge was coming ever closer, and Clay broke into a trot in an effort to get home faster. The bridge marked only the halfway point, and it was already midnight. He rounded the Classroom Office Building at a half-run – and smacked into something quite solid.

His body reacted before his mind could, and he reached out and grabbed the thing he'd so rudely run over in order to steady it. It was a person. Clay's brain caught up with him and he gasped out an apology.

"Sorry, man, didn't mean to run into you like tha –" He broke off in surprise as the person lifted their head and looked up into his eyes, equally shocked. Clay's voice climbed a note.

"Oh – hey."

George's gaze seemed less cold than usual. In fact, it looked as if Clay's sudden appearance had jarred him out of a daze; his dark oak eyes were slightly unfocused and he was gripping a stack of papers to his chest in a reflective stance. As Clay watched, lucidity abruptly returned to the brown eyes. George glanced down at Clay's hands, still locked around his shoulders, and back up into the soccer star's face again. Clay took the hint and quickly let go. The shorter sophomore tilted his head to the side.

"What are you doing out so late?"

Clay smiled back down at him.

"I could ask you the same question."

George's brown eyes returned to their normal, glacial state.

"You could."

The actor shifted his papers back into position and turned away again. Clay watched him go.

You're so worth it.

Chapter End Notes

Well well... :]

You guys... the comments are SO MOTIVATING! I love reading about your opinions on the characters and their actions so much! I'm especially glad so many of you liked Alyssa's advice. And I totally agree that George would be an abysmal friend... so glad y'all think he's a strong character and strangely kind of pleased by the fact that some of

you wouldn't wanna be friends with him. He is the kind of person you just don't want to bother, isn't he?

Anyways, you know the drill. Leave a comment and drop a kudos if you haven't already :]

Follow me on [twitter](#).

Dart to the Wound

Chapter Summary

Dream tries to ask George out

Chapter Notes

Hello! So glad you were all happy with the last chapter! This one might earn a bittersweet reaction tho.

Just to clear it up, the story is set in the 90's! Initially, I forgot that the internet exists and Deam could've just stalked George on Instagram, so I had to improvise instead of re-writing the whole thing. I love old-time romance, and it's convenient for the plot so I guess it works! xD

new character alert Luke Williams is supposed to be Punz. "Williams" is a made-up last name.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Clay drummed his long fingers on the mottled desktop in front of him, trying to keep himself from either dozing off or sneaking peeks at the black jacketed form underneath the long window to his right. He muffled a sigh in the heel of his hand as Professor Fitzgerald explained the significance of the green light at the end of Daisy's dock in *The Great Gatsby*.

A frustrated groan was aching to be released from Clay's throat, but he studiously rejected its pleas. English Language and Society was truly the most insufferable class in the world. Like anyone cared about a stupid green light! Daisy probably just forgot to turn off a weird-colored flashlight or something. However, it wasn't just the trivial nature of the story that was bothering the soccer player that morning.

No, Clay was finally getting nervous about the plan he'd concocted over the University Dining Services' fake chocolate chip pancakes. The conversation he'd had last night with George had been almost...civil until the other sophomore had remembered who he was talking to. Clay was going to try to build off of that quick flash of calm conversation after class. No matter how hard he willed the clock to move faster, however, the period just would not end.

The soccer player idly looked around the room as Professor Fitzgerald turned her broad back to the student body. The chalk squeaked harshly across the blackboard; dust from the erasers coated the old professor's right arm. The students around the soccer star scribbled furiously in their 'U Bookstore' notebooks, tongues poking out from the corner of their mouths, and brows furrowed sharply as they attempted to absorb the intricacies of F. Scott Fitzgerald's masterpiece. Clay snorted to himself and twirled his pencil expertly in his hands before glancing past Luke Williams.

George's chin was braced on his fist; his brown eyes looked dreamily and unseeingly at the blackboard. The soccer player observing him had to repress another snort. A vaguely jealous pang startled him out of his reverie.

He couldn't be feeling jealous just because George had a weird look on his face. It wasn't like the other boy was wearing a lovey-dovey expression. Was he? Clay did a double-take. George's pencil tapped quietly against the desk in front of him; his eyes continued their sightless evaluation of the blackboard. His far-off expression was indeterminable.

Clay twitched in agitation. *What could it mean?* Could he have gained a new suitor, one he liked better? Had he found someone else? Was Clay about to be erased from the trombone player's memory forever?

It wasn't until this last thought hit him that the soccer player recognized the ridiculous trend that his thoughts were taking. Of course, George couldn't have found someone else. He was just... happy.

Clay eyeballed the other boy in increasing consternation. He was *happy*? Happy Georges didn't exist! Only mean, scary Georges were real; the kind that were way too hot for their own good and who tormented poor, impressionable soccer players with abnormally frosty comebacks. Maybe he was just daydreaming.

"Clay. *Clay!*"

The soccer player looked around himself in surprise. The class period was over; the entire class was out the door already except for himself and Luke Williams, who was shaking his arm and looking quite alarmed. The other boy huffed when Clay finally came back down to Earth.

"Jesus, man. Get it together! Class is over!"

"Class is...*shit!*"

Without so much as a backward glance, the soccer player shot out of his seat and rocketed through the door to the hallway, nearly bowling over a group of freshmen in the process. Williams's voice carried after him as he flew down the dark staircase.

"You're welcome!"

George exited Lind Hall in a daze. In the back of his mind, he realized that he was going to have to do an immense amount of research on F. Scott Fitzgerald in order to make up for the lecture that he'd spent daydreaming. It was an interesting position to find himself in; he rarely daydreamed. He considered himself too much of a realist to believe in spending a large amount of time imagining things.

Today, though...today he was going to get his first University Theater Club assignment, and that was enough excitement to send his brain into overdrive.

The young actor found himself checking his watch for the fourth time in five minutes as he walked up University Avenue. 11:26. *Damn.* His appointment with Anders Christian was scheduled for 4:00 that afternoon. It was going to be a long afternoon. He sighed and waited for the stoplight to

turn.

Clay couldn't believe he'd been so stupid. The tall sophomore berated himself slightly hysterically as he flew out the doors of Lind Hall. Passerby shied away from the wayward soccer player in surprise as he skidded to a halt and looked up and down the cobblestone street. *Damn...damn! I lost him.* The soccer player's blonde-streaked head sagged slightly, but not before his peripheral vision registered a black jacketed form turning the corner around the next building.

YES!

By the time the 'walk' light had changed in George's favor, the sophomore had decided that it *had* to be broken. He'd been waiting an interminable amount of time just waiting for the little white walking man to allow him to cross the street, and his impatience was mounting. Finally, though, the oncoming cars slowed to a halt and the light changed, allowing the herd of backpacked students to cross Washington Avenue.

George shuffled through the crosswalk along with them and turned towards Coffman Union, intent on studying for his impending Chemistry exam. He'd taken three steps in that direction when a familiar voice broke into his thoughts.

"Hey! Wait up!"

As soon as he yelled for the other boy to 'wait up', Clay felt stupid for having done so. Was he really expecting George to wait for him? Sure enough, the brunette ahead of him never broke stride, head down against the weight of the iron-gray sky above him. Clay huffed and broke into a trot. *He can't ignore me when I'm walking beside him.*

Three strides later, he was in line with the shorter sophomore. George gave a long-suffering sigh and looked up at the sky as if asking for patience. Clay waited politely for the other boy to finish his prayer, then flashed his best, most dazzling smile at him.

"What's up?"

George decided not to dignify the soccer player's question with a response. What did he mean, 'what's up'? Nothing was 'up'. The sky didn't even look 'up' today. His already precariously balanced good mood was quickly dissipating with every second he spent in the star's presence.

The actor winced as Clay's voice penetrated his thoughts once again. He was like a drill in the hands of an untrained construction worker.

Clay decided to jump-start his plan as he watched the other boy's face become darker and darker. *All right, Clay, give it your best shot.*

"Are you a theater major?"

Aha! George was finally looking at him! Albeit it was a suspicious, squinty-eyed look, but it was better than nothing. Clay mentally tallied himself a point. George's voice was cautious and calculated when he spoke next.

"Why do you ask?"

Clay shrugged his broad shoulders and transferred his backpack from one broad shoulder to the other.

"That play you're working on...I figured if you like plays that much you've gotta be a drama major or something like that."

George growled abruptly and Clay stopped talking. Coffman Union loomed ahead of them. Clay cleared his throat.

"So...are you?"

"Am I *what*?"

Clay laughed. "Listening to me, first of all. The original question was 'Are you a theater major'?"

George didn't seem to find it as funny as the soccer player did. "No, and yes. Will you go away now?"

Clay braced himself.

"I just wanted to tell you that...I like your play."

George stopped in his tracks and stared at him. Clay was a few paces ahead of the shorter sophomore before he realized that the other boy had stopped. The soccer star turned around again. George was appraising him through his dark brown eyes.

"What did you say?" The other sophomore's voice was controlled, but hard.

"I said I liked your play." Clay fidgeted uncomfortably as he gave the compliment for the second time. It was rare that *he* was the one praising someone *else's* work. He glanced back up at the trombone player and was surprised to see an amused smirk on the other boy's face.

"You liked my play."

"Um...yes?"

"You saw one paragraph of it."

Clay stuttered.

"Wh – yes. Well, but, what I saw of it was interesting...I thought it looked...fun."

George's eyebrows arched suddenly and dangerously. "You thought it looked 'fun'?"

Clay backtracked hurriedly. "W – what I mean is, uh. Oh, dammit! I thought your play looks intense and that's...good."

George's dark eyes remained locked onto Clay's green gaze. He nodded very slowly at the star.

"Hm."

Clay fidgeted. "Uh, yeah."

"Thank you."

The soccer player's eyes went wide with surprise. He looked up into the smaller boy's face and grinned, but George's features remained expressionless. The trombone player abruptly started forward again, brushing past Clay and heading for Coffman Union. Clay watched him go a few paces before remembering the last stage of his plan.

"Hey! Wait a sec!"

He ran forward and pulled on the sleeve of the black jacket. George whipped around, bestowing a dangerous look on the star.

"Get off."

Clay raised his hands in surrender but kept talking.

"So...what are you doing this weekend?"

Disbelief sketched itself across George's face, but Clay didn't notice. He was too busy tallying points for himself to notice that he was entering dangerous territory.

The soccer player's ego took over before he could stop to think about what he was saying.

"You're not doing anything, I bet. You're probably just sitting home and doing homework or something equally lame." Clay's smile broadened at his own joke. George's glare became so wintry it was almost crystalline in nature; the air between the two sophomores was arctic enough to shatter at a touch.

"...So why don't you come with me this weekend? We can go to a *real* party, not those stupid band functions you probably go to. You'd have a great time, you wouldn't have to sit around and do homework or read Shakespeare. What do you say?"

George's breath came out in a low, ferocious hiss. Clay took a step back, but it wasn't enough space to keep him safe from the tirade that followed.

"Get – away – from – me! Your ego is *unreal!* How dare you *insinuate* that I have *nothing* to do! Do you think your parties are going to be the best thing that's ever happened to me? Think again! Have you ever considered the fact that, as someone who doesn't participate in the Clay Dream Fan Club, I wouldn't even have fun? Who are *you* to say when and where I'll have a great time? You're a jerk, you know that? An egotistical, slothful, brutish, narcissistic, selfish, insensitive *brat!*"

Clay Dream stood on the sidewalk, stunned by the sudden transformation of the situation at hand. Passerby flinched away from them like they were a couple fighting on the sidewalk outside a convenience store. George glared into Clay's face wrathfully, alarmingly.

The soccer star opened and closed his mouth like a fish, but found he had nothing to say. George glowered at him for a moment more, then turned on his heel and stalked off, leaving Clay in his wake.

Chapter End Notes

So... character development

He'll get there, I have faith in him

Anyways drag Dream's ass in the comments and subscribe so you get emailed when the next chapter is published <3

Follow me on [twitter](#) for updates and crumbs :)

You and I Collide

Chapter Summary

George has his demons from the past and Clay Dream looks a lot like them.
Or does he?

Chapter Notes

HELLO, I see we have some new readers~

As you can see, WE HAVE RENAMED! Could be temporary, could be forever, who knows

Anyways. This chapter is a little personal to me and it was kind of hard to write. Altho not very long, and mostly in George's POV, it is important for the plot. Hope you like it :]

Anxiety disorder and panic attacks tw/cw are in effect

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

No matter how lukewarm hatred was, it was always exhausting. Trying to hate someone without really meaning it was worse. It exposed the same feelings of constant paranoia and confusion but was also accompanied by the knowledge that it wasn't really a necessary expenditure of energy.

George didn't hate Clay Dream. He lay on his faded blue quilt in his single room in Comstock Hall and tried to reason with himself. *It's time to be honest, George.* If the brunette looked at his situation objectively, he would simply have to admit that he was afraid.

Fear had dominated George's life ever since he could remember. It wasn't like he'd ever been abused or anything like that; there was no real reason for his anxiety. He'd been bullied a lot in all of his schools, but that came with his social status. Everyone got bullied. It wasn't even for that reason, however, that he felt afraid. He just...was. There was no way to explain it to anyone, including himself.

The sophomore sat up and crossed his legs. His deep brown hair fell over his eyes as he chewed his thumbnail contemplatively. With the other hand he picked at a loose thread in the old quilt. He'd had the soft material since ninth grade and couldn't seem to get rid of it, for some reason. He'd always felt safe while sitting on it; he supposed that the feeling stemmed from the many hours spent locked in his darkened room, sitting on his bed and feeling...afraid. Just afraid. The quilt had protected him at that point.

There was only one brief time period in his life when he hadn't given in to his terror at every turn. Ethan... Ethan Salvador had come up to him one late afternoon and had swept the smaller boy completely off of his feet.

George remembered the strong arms of the football player as if they were encircling his waist right then. He had always traced a sinewy tendon that had stuck out peculiarly in the running back's forearm. Ethan had always pulled George into his lap when they were alone and held him against his iron-hard chest. And George had felt safe. The bullies had stopped jumping at him from random corners; the shadows of his room had receded in Ethan's light.

And then...

George shook his head. He didn't want to think about the time after. His fears had redoubled thereafter. It was worse because he'd felt how it was to be protected from them. Now he was without his old defense tactics, stripped bare on an open field of razor-sharp paranoia.

He'd come home late on the night that Ethan had left him for some svelte new guy. He'd stumbled through the front door and into the darkened house. The frames of the doors and windows had trembled with violent energy; the grandfather clock in the living room had stared down at him terribly. The hour hand accused him.

He'd backed away wordlessly, mouth gaping open in terror. The banister had grabbed him from behind; he screamed sharply and wheeled around to face it. Again he'd backed away, but the edge of the wall caught him by surprise. He'd whipped around and felt his heart plunge into a vast pit of ice. His mother's bust of Michelangelo's David glared into his eyes with its own sightless ones. The oak floorboards had rushed up to meet him.

That was the way his parents had found him: Sprawled out on the floor, his red t-shirt soaked with salty sweat. He had twitched and screamed as if having a seizure; he wouldn't let his father touch him. When his eyes had opened, they had regarded his parents with a feverish, cornered gaze. His father had tied a washcloth around his eyes to try and reduce the number of stimuli, to try to cut off his fears. The last thing George had seen before falling headfirst into oblivion was his mother, sobbing and dialing the phone with frantic fingers.

He'd ended up in the hospital. No, not the hospital for people who had heart attacks or broken legs. It was the hospital of the broken minds; a ward of people whose only problems were the ones that could not be seen. It had taken half a week for the nervous breakdown to truly subside. He remembered I.V.s and a doctor checking his pulse. He couldn't remember his parents ever coming in to see him, though they claimed they had.

The diagnosis came in, but it was far too abstract to comprehend: *Chronic Anxiety Disorder*. It had been his first panic attack. There would be many more to come. The doctors made guesses about what kind of visual cues might set the high schooler off; they ordered his parents to get rid of anything that conformed to these descriptions. George was referred to a psychiatrist and placed on Buspar, an anti-anxiety pill. And from that day on, everybody was watching him.

His parents had hated the thought of him joining the Theater Club at his high school. They'd figured, and with reason, that the instant that George got up in front of hundreds of people, he'd panic. George had seen their point; he'd doubted himself as well. Mr. Cavoti, however, had not seen it that way. He'd insisted that the best way to master one's fears was to confront them. Trite advice that it was, he'd said it so convincingly that George had believed him.

Mr. Cavoti had been right. The first time that George had performed, he'd felt a magical release. The stage lights shone brilliantly on his form; the audience melted away. Only his baritone voice remained. Only the script mattered. His world was on the stage. The curtain fell and the audience gave him a standing ovation when he came out for the curtain call. A radiant smile had crossed his face as he took his bow before the cheering crowd. He'd felt so *free*.

After that experience, fear had become less of a dominator of his life, and more of a constant companion. George would never feel the urge to try new things, to take huge risks, but if life stayed uncomplicated, he could handle it. The Buspar kept him on an even keel, his psychiatrist watched him keenly. His life was not over.

The sophomore sighed as he resurfaced from his memories. Afraid...now he was afraid. He was always afraid. He would always be that way.

Clay Dream, however, provided a new kind of fear. When he got right down to it, George realized that he was instinctively protecting himself from a breakdown similar to the one he'd had after Ethan had left him. After all, he reasoned, if he completely lost his footing when Ethan had abandoned him, how would he react when the same thing happened with someone so similar to his high school love?

George didn't want to be afraid anymore. Deep within his mind, he admitted to himself that he was deeply attracted to the other boy. It was getting harder to ignore the jock now that he was insisting on following George around everywhere. If the other sophomore would just be his arrogant self and nothing more, George would have found it easy to ignore him. Now, though...

George rubbed his face in exhaustion. Clay was persisting. *Why* was he persisting? He looked like he was honestly trying to start a conversation, but that damn ego of his always interrupted. *Who is the man behind the ego?* George wondered. *Is there one?* It looked like he was going to find out.

If Clay was just a normal guy, George wouldn't have a chance at resisting him. As long as Dream remained an ass, George was safe from Cupid's arrows. If Dream changed, however...

God help him.

Clay couldn't believe what he was doing. The yellow flower in his hand grinned up at him cheekily; the ripe petals cheerfully flapped against his hand. Clay scowled at them and attempted to hide the obscene thing from the public eye as he stepped into the foyer of Comstock Hall.

The soccer player took a quick glance around the lobby area. *Phew*. There was no one there to see him perform this embarrassing stunt. The exhausted-looking student manning the front desk took Clay's request in stride. Clay gave the flower to him along with a small, folded-up piece of paper, and waited until the boy had placed the two items carefully in mailbox 404.

George fumbled for the key to his mailbox. The stupid thing looked exactly like his old house key, and no matter how hard he tried, he never managed to pick the right one.

Aha! He let out a triumphant internal cheer as the mailbox lock yielded, then stopped short in surprise. Something quite yellow was jammed into the small box. He stooped and peered in at it, then slowly reached in and pulled. A bright yellow Irish Hope rose sprang out of its hiding place, winking up at him as it cartwheeled into his arms. George stared down at it in amusement and fascination. Who would have sent him a *rose*?

He bent again and stuck his hand blindly in the long box, grimacing in anticipation of what he might find there. Something met his fingers. He jumped back in momentary surprise. Embarrassment colored his cheeks as he yanked out the offending material. A piece of paper.

Slowly and with shaking fingers the sophomore unfolded the note.

I'm sorry.

God help him.

Chapter End Notes

So,,, :]

The characters are not going to spontaneously change themselves. Their relationship will change over time tho, this is a romance after all. But for now, they spend 80 of their time fighting and 20 in confusion

Anyways, this is my [twitter](#), which I always drop after every chapter :P

Leave a comment! Criticism is *always* welcome :]

Love Drug

Chapter Summary

Clay takes a leap, George considers a step back

Chapter Notes

Hello :]

Long chapter alert! Idk what came over me haha

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It wasn't a *sure* thing, George reasoned, that Clay Dream had sent the yellow rose. The brunet raised his head off of his pillow with an effort. The flower had taken up residence in his coffee thermos, which was resting on his cabinet across the room. It meant that he couldn't have coffee until the flower died, but the sophomore felt that it was a worthwhile cause.

His dark hair hit the pillow again as a burst of air escaped his lungs. He'd gone over the past week with a fine-tooth comb, determined to find somebody—*anybody*—who owed him an apology besides the soccer star. Despite his best efforts, he'd turned up empty-handed.

George let out a short snarl and turned over so quickly that his back cracked sharply in protest. *Ow... damn it.* The flower winked at him in a flirty fashion from across the room. The sophomore couldn't help but smile back at it before returning to a more comfortable position. So... Dream had sent the flower. What did that mean?

He couldn't come up with an answer. Determining that further evaluation of the situation was no use, the brunet got up and rifled through his closet for something to wear to the band party that night. His slightly bowed mouth quirked up at the thought. Band parties were always the best.

Clay Dream found himself in a 'love therapy' session with his roommate for the second time in a week. This was strange by anyone's standards, the soccer forward thought snidely. Not only were they two of the most powerful and popular athletes in the state, but they were sitting *in their room*, alone, on a Friday night. Nevertheless, there they sat; Nick on one end of the futon, Clay leaning on the other.

Nick twirled the futon's pillow in his large hands as Clay confided in him. When the soccer star had finished telling the tale of the fight and the flower, the halfback sighed and massaged the bridge of his nose.

"You really like this guy, don't you?"

Clay was surprised at the question. "Well, yeah, I guess."

"You *like* a lot of people. The question is, what sets him apart from the others? Do you *love* him?"

Clay jumped childishly at the use of the word 'love'. "Since when does *love* have anything to do with this?"

Nick shook his head back and forth mournfully.

"Dream, Dream, Dream. You need to have another look at your feelings. Lemme help you. What do you feel in your body when he talks to you, or even when you just see him on the street?"

Dream looked at the halfback like he was crazy. Nick groaned.

"Just do it, Clay."

"Fine... I feel... this is impossible, Nick, I don't know how I feel!"

"Just give me an adjective or something."

"Fine. I feel... an ache... whenever he glares at me, is that good enough?"

Clay hated revealing his emotions precisely because of this. He could feel his temper rising steeply and his face heating up. He spat out the words quickly so that he wouldn't have to think about what he was admitting to. Nick simply continued to watch him, however, and the soccer player was forced to continue.

"When I see him, it's like... I know that I shouldn't go near him, 'cause it's obvious that he hates me or something. I just can't help it. Every time I see him I feel like something inside of me is dragging me over to look at him, to talk to him."

Nick evaluated him through his hazel eyes. "Do you get butterflies in your stomach whenever you see him or think about him?"

Clay pondered. "No, not really," he said at last, "It's more like I feel compelled to try and figure him out. It feels a lot deeper than the stupid butterflies feeling; I've had the butterflies before and they weren't as strong as this."

Nick's eyebrows hiked up in surprise. "You've had butterflies before?"

Clay waved his hand impatiently. "Just fleetingly. It happens whenever I see someone that I really want to get with, but that feeling always goes away immediately when I talk to them."

"That's probably because you *always* score with them," Nick laughed. Clay threw a pillow at him.

"Stop it! I'm trying to have a serious conversation with you, for once."

"Sorry."

"So...can I stop being so girly now?" Clay looked up at the halfback hopefully. Nick ran a hand over his face again and left it there, regarding the soccer player through his fingers.

"Clay, it's not for me that you need to say these things. You gotta recognize them yourself. You gotta figure out how much you care about this guy, because he sounds like a real tough nut to me. He's screwed up, but for some reason you can't stop thinking about him. What you have to figure out for yourself is *why*."

Clay shifted on the futon and dropped his eyes to the multicolored rug. He absently shifted the corner of the rug with his foot as he thought.

"Why, Clay? Why do you want this guy so bad? He could be just like everyone else, minus the love drug that's obviously absent from his veins."

Clay sighed.

"It's like what you said earlier, Nick. With everyone else, it's like I *always* score. I can't *not score* with most people. I go around and everyone likes me, everyone appreciates me. I have friends..." the star's voice trailed off and his brow furrowed. "...but suddenly there's this *guy*, and he *hates* me without even knowing me; he doesn't want anything to do with me at all. He just wants me to leave him alone, and if I have to be near him, all he wants is to make me leave as quickly as possible."

"So you're fascinated with how he's rejecting you, and that's the entire point?"

"No!" As soon as he said it, Clay was surprised by his own forcefulness. "No, that's not the whole thing. I don't know why, but just... everything he does is interesting, everything he does is... right. You know?"

Nick smiled broadly at him. "You've never felt curious about someone before?"

Clay was quiet for a moment. His voice was soft and contemplative when he spoke again, a tone rarely gracing his vocal chords.

"Not like this."

Nick's smile grew. "You're in love, Clay," he said softly, "It's not a bad thing. Do *you* think it's a bad thing?"

The soccer star looked down at his hands. "I don't know. Are you *sure* that's what it is?"

"Only you can know that, buddy. You *did* give him a flower, when was the last time you did that for someone?"

Clay smiled slightly. "Yeah, I guess."

"So?"

Clay looked down at his hands again, then back up at the halfback. "I just don't know what to do to get with him."

Nick put a hand on the blond's shoulder. "Well...love's not supposed to be easy. I know that acquiring someone to spend the night with is a specialty of yours, but love is something else entirely. Each situation is different. If you want my advice, I'd say do whatever Alyssa told you to. I bet the flower was a good move."

"Really?" Clay's smile bloomed. "Thought of that one myself."

He seemed so proud of himself that Nick had to work to contain his laughter.

"You sure did. Just...think before you speak next time."

Clay nodded, then checked his watch.

"Dammit. I'm late for the party."

"Which party is this?"

Clay looked embarrassed. "Marching band."

Nick scrutinized the soccer star. "Be careful of what you say."

Dream hopped off of the futon and grabbed his letter jacket. He looked back at his roommate as the door swung open.

"Who says I'm going to *say* anything?"

Nick felt a thrill of dread.

Band parties were always sheer insanity. George wove through the costumed, singing, dancing, shouting forms and felt laughter bubbling inside of him. Just being around these people made him feel so energetic and alive.

Karl Jacobs toasted him from across the room. George reciprocated and tossed off the Jell-O shot, making a face as the liquid burned its way down his throat. Technically, he wasn't supposed to be drinking while taking Buspar, but it was an alcohol sort of night. He'd be all right, as long as he didn't get totally smashed.

George was grabbing his third shot from the makeshift bar when Karl appeared again, this time at his side. The other trombone player opened his mouth and shouted something in George's ear.

The young actor made a face. "I can't hear you."

Karl cupped a hand around his ear and made a confused expression. George rolled his eyes and grabbed his friend's arm, towing him into an alcove further away from the drunken karaoke. Karl put his mouth up to George's ear and yelled in order to be heard.

"I said 'Guess who's here?'"

George shrugged. "I dunno. The Pope?"

Karl laughed. "Bigger!"

"Who's bigger than the Pope... oh no." The sophomore's brown eyes closed in frustration. "You are *not* trying to tell me that Clay Dream's *here* at the *band party*."

Karl nodded slowly and emphatically. "Oh, yes. The King himself is here. He's not getting a great reception, but he's here."

George gave a snarl of aggravation and punched the wall. "Ow! Dammit! Why the hell does he have to be here? Why does he keep doing this to me?"

Karl lifted his eyebrows in surprise and turned to face the brunet completely. "What do you mean, 'doing this to you'? Does he bother you a lot? Do you know him?"

George shook his head impatiently. "Doesn't matter, I'll explain later. Thanks for telling me."

Karl nodded and slid back onto the dance floor. George moved out of the alcove and scanned the room. It didn't take long to find the letter-jacketed soccer star. People were forming a wide berth around him, and fingers were pointing in his direction. Dream was heading his way, George noted with despair. He melted back into the shadowy niche and hoped to God that the soccer star wouldn't look too closely at it as he passed.

Clay was not having a great time at the band party. So far he'd arrived, tossed off a couple of shots, and was now wandering through the crowded, noisy rooms of the Ski-U-Mansion, headquarters of the Marching Band, intent on finding George in the madness around him.

The star ducked quickly as someone leapt past him and swung wildly from the chandelier, making chimpanzee noises at the people below him. A shriek of laughter accompanied the guy's antics. Clay decided to try the other side of the floor. There was a dark hallway sprouting from the far corner. Maybe his prey was somewhere in there.

It was almost tragically easy to get through the swaying bodies around him. Everywhere he went, the way parted in front of him. Bandies whispered to each other around him as he passed. Clay had realized that the band wasn't exactly his number one fan, but he hadn't been expecting his reception to be quite this cool. The star scowled deeply, shoved his hands in the pockets of his jacket, and pushed his way through the floor.

By the time he reached the dark hallway Clay looked like he'd been through a tornado. His shirt was rumpled and there was a stain on the sleeve of his maroon and gold letter jacket; his hair stuck out in odd directions. Bandies moved like wild animals in senseless trajectories, the star realized as he put his hand on the doorframe that led to the hallway.

Clay leaned against the wall just inside the hallway to recover his breath. He stared into a dark niche, planning his attack, then jumped a mile in the air. Someone was staring right back at him in equal alarm. Someone who looked familiar...

"Hey, George." The star stepped into the alcove and was met with a glaring pair of dark oak eyes. The smaller sophomore held his ground as the soccer player advanced. Clay stopped just inside the tiny recess and leaned on the wall.

"What's up?"

George looked back at him for a moment, then looked down at his shoes. Clay tried again.

"Did you..." Clay suddenly found that he couldn't ask about the flowers. He cast about quickly for something else to say. "Did you tell all of these people that I'm an ass or something?"

Shit! Thought the star as the other boy's head snapped up again. *That wasn't what I wanted to say at all.*

"What are you talking about?!" The brunet's eyes were narrowing dangerously. Clay retaliated before he could stop himself.

"All of these people seem to hate me, that's what I'm talking about! Are you telling them stuff about me?"

George gave a frightening snarl. Before Clay could blink, the trombone player was in his face.

"It seems to me like they're just excellent judges of character! Why are you here, anyway? This is a *band* party!"

Clay felt a surge of relief. "So you're not talking to them about me?"

George gave him a look of sheer disbelief. "No! Why would I?"

The soccer star felt his momentary relief dissipate. It was replaced by a powerful surge of annoyance and jealousy. Why *wasn't* George talking to people about him?

Clay folded his arms across his chest and vocalized his annoyance.

"Why not?"

George's mouth fell open. *Why not?!* Dream was staring back at him defiantly. The shorter sophomore made sputtering noises for a few seconds, then threw his hands up into the air and brushed past the soccer player. He was going to need at least two more shots before he could handle this situation. Unfortunately, the soccer star was trailing him back to the bar, shouting complete insanity at his back.

"Why not, George?"

George tossed a response over his shoulder as he wove through a gaggle of inebriated clarinet players.

"Why not?! How about because you're not part of my life, is that good enough?"

The soccer star looked angrier by the second. George was now more focused on getting to the door than the bar. Anything to get away from Clay Dream.

"Why can't I be part of your life?" The soccer player was still snarling at his back as they laced through the crowd. At last, the front door came into sight.

George pushed the tuba player who was blocking his way to the side and stumbled into the quiet entry hall. He felt his anger building like a column of smoke. The young actor turned around to face the soccer star, his voice echoing in the empty foyer.

"You're not my friend, Dream, that's why!"

"Why not?" Clay demanded, "How come you can talk to all of these people but not me?"

"I don't want to be —"

George stopped short. Clay was staring into his eyes with a look of intense concentration. The shorter sophomore gulped. Suddenly, he felt cornered and exposed. Dream was definitely way too close for comfort, and seemed to be...getting closer. George yelped internally and tried to sidestep past the star and towards the front door.

Dream's hand suddenly slammed into the wall beside him, then did the same with his other arm,

effectively caging the shorter sophomore in. George's escape route was abruptly cut off. Clay leaned down, forehead nearly touching the other boy's, lips far too close for comfort. George felt a twinge of distant panic as the soccer player whispered into his face.

"Why won't you give me a chance?"

George's voice failed him utterly. Clay's emerald eyes bored into his own from an inch away; the soccer star was hypnotizing him with them. Clay's breath was ghosting over his face. *He smells like Jell-O shots.*

George had barely completed the thought when the jock closed the distance between them and sealed his soft lips over the shorter sophomore's. George's brown eyes snapped open in shock, then fluttered closed again of their own accord.

Oh, God.

Clay gently pressed his lips into the trombone player's and waited for a response. George froze against him. Time seemed to stop.

*No! George! George, get a hold of yourself! Look what's going on! **Clay Dream is kissing you!***

With a gasp, George finally realized what was happening. His brown eyes shot open again. Dream had backed him up into the doorframe and was clearly trying to get more out of the deal.

Rage boiled in George's stomach. He threw his arms up into Dream's shoulders with more strength than he'd ever summoned before. The soccer star stumbled backwards under the blow, falling into the opposite wall with a crash.

The entire exchange had taken less than two seconds. In the time it took for a normal person to blink twice, Clay had gone from negotiating his way into George's mouth to lying sprawled out against the opposite wall. The blow had knocked him breathless and partially senseless; crushed against the wall, he watched the other sophomore with astonishment in his green eyes. He would never have guessed that George was that strong.

The other sophomore stood in front of him, practically vibrating. His fists clenched rapidly and he had to force his next sentence out from between gritted teeth.

"What—the *hell* —"

Clay found he didn't have a good answer to the implied question. The two sophomores stared each other down. The voices from outside the entryway grew louder. Clay opened his mouth to try to

smooth it over, but was cut off by the sudden appearance of five burly men blowing through the door to his right, obviously on their way out. All five stopped abruptly in the threshold, their narrowed eyes sizing up the situation.

Clay gulped. Suddenly his situation was looking much worse. The gorilla-men looked over at George.

"Hey, George. What's going on? This guy bothering you?"

The soccer star yelped internally. This wasn't good. George locked gazes with Clay and shook his head deliberately.

"Thanks guys, but he was just *leaving*." The trombone player emphasized the last word with a jerk of his head in the direction of the door. The five men sized Clay up again.

One of them spoke up.

"Maybe he should leave a little faster, then."

Clay exited without a word. He could feel George's burning gaze follow him out the door.

George collapsed against the wall, looking up at the ceiling as he slid to the floor. He vaguely registered one of the tuba players asking him if he was all right. He smiled up at them briefly and lied through his teeth.

Clay didn't know what had come over him. What had he hoped to gain by kissing George like that? The soccer player berated himself sharply as he walked through Frat Row. The drunken residents of the district called out for him to join them, but Dream shook his head and kept walking. *Why had he done it?* He was just getting on stable grounds with the other sophomore, and now he'd ruined it, possibly for good.

Or had he? Clay's dark brow furrowed as he remembered the kiss. The split second it had taken George to push away had lasted a millennium for Clay, because before George had pushed away... he'd been responding. He had been responding! The soccer player's momentary gloom abruptly lifted at the thought, and a smile spread across his face.

So George *thought* he was upset right now. Big deal. He'd get over it, right? And when he got over it, maybe he'd think about the kiss a little bit more and decide that he really *did* want to get with the soccer star. Clay smiled at his own genius and started back towards Centennial Hall, humming under his breath.

George stormed into his single room at Comstock Hall, fumbling simultaneously for the light and his Buspar. The white pills flaked in his hand as the young actor stuck his head under the faucet of the sink in the corner of his room.

One... two.

He sighed as the ovoid pills worked their way down his throat, then dropped down on his bed without bothering to get undressed. The faded blue quilt rubbed against his cheek calmingly, and the sophomore felt his eyes closing.

The night's events had left him drained and confused. His body had liked kissing Dream, that much was for certain. His mind, however, was still screaming at him for letting the kiss last the millisecond that it had. He didn't know what to think.

Only one thing was certain, George thought as he rolled over and turned out the lamp. He was now more determined than ever to keep Dream at arm's length.

Chapter End Notes

That was... so hard to write *faints*

I do not condone what Dream did in *any* way, and him being drunk does not excuse his actions either.

[twitter](#) & [tumblr](#)

Radiators and Rain

Chapter Summary

Clay reconsiders his actions, George makes a friend

Chapter Notes

yup. george makes a friend.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The worst thing about Clay Dream, George thought to himself as he hurried across the Washington Street Bridge, was not that he was such a pretty boy, though that was sort of irksome. It wasn't that he thought he was the biggest kid in the candy store, though that was also annoying. It wasn't that he was talented, or that he was famous, or that everything good gravitated toward him.

No, the worst thing about Clay Dream was that he was so damn hard to hold at arm's length.

The brunet stole a glance at the maroon and gold railing that prevented passersby from falling to a brutal death in the icy Mississippi River. His head swam suddenly and the sophomore wrenched his gaze away from the foamy depths below him.

Judging from the hematomic clouds rolling in from the north, a nasty storm was on its way. It would be just his luck to get caught on a terrifying bridge in the middle of an ice storm. George doubled his pace and tried to think of something else.

Clay Dream was something else, that was for sure. George shook his head. It wouldn't do much good to think about Dream now; he'd spent all weekend huffing and tossing and turning over the issue. The sophomore had tried desperately to convince himself that Dream's drunkenness was what had caused the foolish star to kiss him at the band party. He clung to the hope that Dream would never have done such a stupid thing if he'd been sober. Though George had tried frantically to believe this notion, however, his subconscious had rejected it immediately.

No, Dream had known exactly what he was doing. Now it was all a matter of 'why' and 'what now'. George had undergone many emotions over the weekend; now all he could feel was confusion. All weekend he had kept up an internal mantra: *I will not let Clay Dream seduce me. I will not let Clay Dream seduce me.* Each time he repeated it he'd felt more confused, and less sure of what he was saying.

The young actor's brown eyes rolled heavenwards as he passed the three-quarters mark on the bridge: A crude graffiti symbol with the word "Urine" printed above it. *You know you go to a Minnesota college when all the graffiti artists can think of is "Urine"*, the sophomore thought with a snort. The Rarig Center was in sight, as was the end of the bridge. *Thank God.*

George clamped down on his thoughts firmly, focusing on the task at hand: He was to get his assignment from the Theater Club today. He needed to concentrate on that and nothing else. The best thing to do was to forget about Dream for now, and let the soccer player make the first move tomorrow in class. That way, George could continue to hope that it had all been a very weird nightmare.

Clay threw his soccer ball at the ceiling and winced as bits of plaster rained down in retaliation. The occupant of the room whose floor he had just assaulted shouted something down at him, but the soccer star wasn't listening. He was *bored*.

Clay considered it a travesty that a man of his popularity should spend so much time in his own dorm room, alone. He glared savagely at the ball in his hands; the black octagons were marred by the white powder of the ceiling. He pulled down the sleeve of his shirt and wiped them clean again.

There were no parties to attend this Sunday night; boiling clouds had rolled into town uninvited and were enjoying themselves by threatening the inhabitants of the University with sleet. No one was foolish enough to try to get a party going under those conditions. So, that left homework and bothering his roommate as his only options for entertainment.

The star was not about to do homework on the weekends. That was completely out of the question. As for his roommate...Nick was in the Arts Quarter somewhere, turning in a creative writing assignment. In short, there was nothing to occupy Clay Dream, superstar, except for his thoughts.

The soccer ball hit the ceiling again, narrowly missing the light fixture. Clay *hated* thinking. It wasn't that he was particularly bad at it; contrary to popular belief, he wasn't stupid. It was just that thinking wasn't a hobby of his.

The whole thinking business would be a lot better, Clay mused, if George didn't keep appearing in said thoughts. He had left the party on Friday feeling proud of himself for kissing the shorter sophomore. Now, though...

Clay was doubting himself. He'd never experienced self-doubt like this before, and he wasn't sure that it was such a good thing. Now, though, the feeling came on in waves, as if to make up for the lost time. *Had* he made the right decision by forcing the other sophomore's hand?

He kept envisioning George's dark eyes glaring into his.

- "*He was just leaving.*"

The topaz irises had snapped fire at him from across the dimly lit entryway. So many levels of strangeness existed in those eyes. Clay was not the most observant person in the world, but he could read those eyes like a book. When they weren't guarded by the iron gates of sarcasm, they spoke eloquently of their owner's emotions. So many levels of strangeness...bitterness, vulnerability, confusion, betrayal.

Clay sighed and folded his arms over the soccer ball. Remembering the look in George's eyes forced him to reconsider his actions, and he didn't like the feeling. He liked the straightforward nature of his previous hook-ups; he enjoyed the easy way that his partners would connect with him.

Deep down, though, Clay knew that this wasn't just a hook-up anymore.

The soccer player let out an explosive gust of air and hurled the soccer ball at the ceiling again. The inhabitant of the room above shouted abuse in the soccer player's direction, making Clay's mouth curl upwards in satisfaction. He caught the ball easily as it came down again, and made his decision.

He would deal with it in class tomorrow. Maybe if he let George make the first move, he could get a better idea of where he stood.

Heaven itself was bearing down on the University of Minnesota. George leaned on the radiator just inside the front doors of the Rarig Center and attempted to dry himself off.

The sophomore glanced at his sodden watch as he spread his black jacket out on one side of the radiator's grill. He had time to stand around for a few minutes and get dry; his appointment with Anders Christian wasn't for another hour. He sighed and leaned his head back against the wall. The radiator's warm grill dug into his lower back in a comforting sort of way.

The brunet was abruptly brought out of his reverie by the hiss of the automatic door to his left. A handsome, young man who seemed a bit taller than him dove through the elements and stumbled into the dimly lit entryway. George couldn't help but crack a smile as the water-logged student made a disgusted face at his clothes. The other man looked up and smiled back at him.

"What you laughin' at? You're just as wet as I am!"

George's grin spread. "Not for long!" He motioned at the radiator behind him. "Care to join me?"

He was rewarded with a soft laugh. "Why, thank you!"

George pulled his coat off of half of the radiator and shifted to the side. The drenched new arrival sighed in relief as he leaned against the gently humming heater.

"Boy, some weather, huh?" The other man's voice was deep but calm. For a reason, he couldn't explain, George felt completely at ease with this intruder, something he rarely felt when faced with someone new.

The shorter sophomore looked out at the storm; the bike rack only seven feet from the front door was a gray blur. Anything further away was completely obscured by the downpour.

"You said it," he remarked quietly. There was a moment's comfortable silence before the other man held out a large hand.

"Name's Nick."

George reached out and shook it. "George. Nice to meet you."

Nick bestowed another wide smile on the brunet. "Likewise. Any man who'll share his heater is all

right by me."

A peal of laughter worked its way loose of George's throat before he could think about it. Surprise flooded the young actor's heart at the sound. *It's been a long time since I've laughed like that.*

The sophomore closed his eyes and tilted his head back against the bricks of the wall. Maybe he should be trying to make more friends. It was nice to laugh with someone...*really* laugh. Sure, he had all kinds of friends in the band, but they realized that he had very solid boundaries and didn't try to be any friendlier than he wanted. He appreciated that. He considered them to be friends. The weird thing was that suddenly he was longing for something more.

One of his many problems, George abruptly realized, was that he didn't know how to ask someone to be a better friend than they already were. Was it that hard, normally? Was he really craving a *best* friend?

The skin on the side of his face burned suddenly and the brunet slapped a hand to his cheek, expecting it to come into contact with a mosquito or a gnat. A burst of laughter from his new friend jolted him out of his meditation. He whipped his head around and tilted an eyebrow at the other man, who was laughing hysterically.

"What's so funny?" George couldn't help but soften the sting of his words with a grin. Nick slapped a hand against the radiator, making a loud *clang* sound. With what seemed like a monumental effort, the handsome man brought himself back under control. He bit his lower lip at the expression on the shorter sophomore's face in an effort to keep from relapsing.

"Sorry, sorry...I just think it's funny when people randomly hit themselves in the face."

George was surprised by the deep blush that worked its way onto his face.

"Thought there was something on me," he muttered.

"Sorry, you probably felt me staring. I was trying to figure out why you seem so familiar."

George cocked his head and regarded the taller man. "I don't think we've ever met before."

Nick's hazel eyes had partially disappeared underneath the weight of his furrowed brow. "Yeah, I don't think so either, but you still seem familiar. Maybe one of my friends knows you and told me about you...*oh*."

"Oh, what?"

The hazel eyes fastened themselves on him again, their gaze softening in...affection? George's confusion was mounting fast. What was this guy talking about?

"You're being stalked by Clay Dream, aren't you?"

George jerked his head back towards the other student so hard his neck cracked. Wincing, he rubbed it with his hand.

"What—you know—how did you know that?"

Nick put his large hands up in a calming fashion, and George felt his body relaxing against the radiator as if on command.

"Don't sweat it, man. I know everything about Mr. Clay. He's my roommate."

George looked at his new friend sidelong and tried to decide how it was that 'Modest Dream' could have such a...*decent* person as his roommate. He'd always envisioned the soccer star as having an equally obnoxious jock sharing his room. Not like he'd ever given serious thought about Dream's living situation.

Nick was smiling down at him. "So you're the infamous George. I'm glad to finally meet you."

"Didn't we already go through the introductions?" The evil, clenching feeling of being cornered was summoning his sarcastic side, and George had to clamp down on his tongue to keep from insulting his new friend. Nick, however, seemed to understand.

"Don't worry, man. Clay and I..." the handsome man searched for words. "We're not on the same page with most things. I'm not going to magically summon him here to torment you or anything like that. In fact, it seems to me like he could stand to give you some space."

George felt his shoulders relax, and he leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes. "Wow," he muttered, "What a small world."

Nick laughed beside him, shaking the radiator lightly. "Yeah."

They stood in companionable silence before Nick broke it again.

"You're really driving him crazy, you know."

George opened his eyes again and stared at the ceiling without responding. Nick didn't seem to mind.

"I think it's good for him, personally. He's never had anyone so stubbornly resist him like you're doing now. You just made it worse for yourself by ignoring him, you know."

George sighed. "I know."

"Keeps him interested though. He's developing quite the crush." The unspoken question hovered in the warm air. *How do you feel about it?* George rolled his head back and forth against the brick before responding.

"That's the only thing that he's interested in: The chase. As soon as I gave in, he'd be gone. I don't want that. I want...Uh...sorry. Don't know why I'm talking like this all of a sudden." The young actor shifted uncomfortably against the grill of the radiator. Why had he said all of that? It was just this guy; he was so easy to talk to. George was afraid of that; Nick made it easy to lose control and spill all of his feelings for the world to see.

"Hey, take it easy. It's good to talk about these things."

George sighed again.

"I don't really talk that much."

A rumble of laughter reached his ears. "Seems that way."

Another minute crawled by before Nick spoke again.

"At first, that *was* all that he was interested in. He'd come home every day and be all huffy; whining about this kid in his class that hated him for no reason."

George stiffened for a minute, but another rumble of laughter soothed his pride. Nick continued his

story softly.

"Then one day he came home and looked real whipped. All he would tell me was that he 'messed up'. I figured it had something to do with you, but he wouldn't tell me that until much later when we finally talked about it."

George raised his eyebrows. "You guys *talk* about me?"

"Only twice. Clay isn't real good with feelings, in case you haven't figured that out yet."

George snorted. "Yeah, I noticed."

"Boy, he could not figure out what he'd done wrong, but he sure felt bad about it. He's been on a sort of emotional rollercoaster ever since then; thinking he's done something right, knowing he's messed something else up. If he wasn't such a bonehead with so much pride as a buffer, he'd really be depressed now."

George grinned despite himself. "If he wasn't such a bonehead, he'd have it figured out by now."

Nick laughed softly. "Yeah...but the truth is, he *is* a bonehead. A bonehead that's gone a little crazy over you."

George pulled his head off of the wall with an effort, then gave up and dropped it back. Could he tell his new friend what had happened at the party?

Oh, screw it.

"He..." The brunet trailed off uncertainly.

The taller man looked at him questioningly. George licked his lips nervously and tried again.

"He tried to kiss me on Friday."

Nick let his head fall back onto the wall with a dull *thud*, then brought his hands up to cover his eyes.

"He didn't."

George sighed in the affirmative. Nick let out a long, low groan.

"That...*idiot*."

The shorter sophomore let out a short bark of laughter and looked out at the rain. The silence stretched on another minute before George broke it with a soft question.

"Nick?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you think he'd dump me?"

Nick raised his gaze to the other boy's slumped form.

"I think...that I don't know. The only thing I know is that you've...*interested* him in a way that he's never really felt before. He likes learning things about you. He likes watching you, he likes talking to you, no matter how unsuccessful he is. Now I don't know if that interest would disappear or not

if you two dated. This situation has never really happened before to him. He could get bored. He could stay with you for life. The question is, are you willing to risk it?"

The rain slid over the window like tears. George shivered and looked away from the windows.

"I don't know. I don't want to get involved with a bad relationship...but..."

Nick chuckled. "Always a but, isn't there?"

The corners of George's bowed mouth curved up slightly at the other sophomore's words, and his tone was contemplative.

"He's a lot like my high school boyfriend." The smile faded abruptly and a pained expression passed over the young actor's features. "I...loved him."

Nick's eyes softened. "You never forget your first love, do you?"

George sighed and crossed his arms over his stomach.

"No," he murmured, almost to himself. "You don't."

"Know what I would do if I were you?"

George looked up with a smile. "What would you do?"

Nick paused and looked out at the streaked landscape before continuing.

"I'd give Clay a week or two more to try to get his act together. If you're still not interested in him by that point, you won't have to worry about your defenses breaking down and getting you hurt; he'll have annoyed you so much that you won't want him. If he changes to your liking, however, you still have the opportunity to either back out or keep waiting for him to come around."

George considered this wisdom quietly.

"Who knows?" Nick said softly. "He may just get himself wrapped around your little finger."

George smiled, then began to laugh at the mental image of Clay Dream, superstar, following a little nerdling around like a puppy dog. His laughter was infectious, and soon both sophomores were hanging onto the radiator for balance as they gasped for breath.

George finally straightened up and wiped his eyes. He glanced down at his watch and jumped. Ten minutes until his appointment with Anders Christian. A twinge of regret tugged at him as he looked back at Nick. He'd had fun talking to this guy; rarely had he opened up to people and enjoyed it so much.

"I have to go see my advisor now."

Nick smiled at him. "Too bad. I enjoyed talking to you."

George couldn't help the sudden smile that spread across his face. "Yeah, same here." He backed away towards the interior door of the entryway. "Well, I'll see you around, I guess."

Nick smiled as the black-jacketed form disappeared through the doors, heading for the north hallway of the theater center. He leaned his head against the wall behind him, mimicking the pose of the boy he'd just met.

One thing was for sure, Nick thought with a laugh, Clay sure had his work cut out for him.

Chapter End Notes

this chapter was a last-minute addition and I am so so happy with how it turned out

so dreamy boy is (sure, briefly) questioning himself. and what would the next conversation between the roomies be?

so sorry for the late update! I was very busy this week

[twitter](#)

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Happy Thanksgobbling

Chapter Summary

Dream and Nick have a chat over breakfast, George is sad

Chapter Notes

i suck at writing summaries

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The alarm relayed its message incessantly in the deep stillness of the darkened room. Clay cracked open an eye with a superhuman effort and groaned. *Beep...beep...beep*. The star raised one hand to his forehead while bashing the black plastic clock with his other. Wednesdays were hell.

The loft above him creaked and groaned as Nick toppled out of it. Clay uncovered his face and braced himself. *One, two, three!* On cue, his roommate ripped the covers off of the soccer star.

"Wake up, Dreamy-poo," the halfback sing-songed. Clay threw his pillow halfheartedly. It missed the other man by miles, instead coming to rest beside Nick's desk. The shorter man burst into laughter at the woeful expression on his roommate's face, then dodged the other pillow.

"Hey, hey! Stop it! Get up so we can go get food."

Clay's stomach deferred to this wisdom, and reluctantly he stumbled out of bed. His closet yielded few possibilities, signifying that they desperately needed to do laundry. Clay smiled. Doing laundry was one of the few chores he actually enjoyed. He vowed to take care of his clothing situation tonight. The sophomore pulled on a tight white t-shirt and washed out dark blue jeans, then threw on his letter jacket just for fun.

Damn, he thought with a grin as he looked in the mirror, *I look good*.

"Clay, stop making kissy faces at yourself and get your ass down to the cafeteria. I got somethin' to tell you."

Clay pouted at his roommate, winked at himself in the mirror, and strutted past his amused friend. He could be admired by all later. Now, though, it was time for food.

Clay chewed a piece of rubbery bacon slowly as he stared out the windows of the cafeteria at the November gloom. A heavy wet blanket of fog hovered between the glistening bare branches of the trees in the bitter courtyard outside. The view out the windows on the other side of the cafeteria didn't yield a better view: The river lay in its bed like a flint-colored snake. The star sighed and trained his eyes on his roommate's form as the handsome man carefully carted his tray to the two-person table. Clay eyeballed the large pile of scrambled eggs as the halfback sat down with a sigh.

"Dude. Are you seriously going to eat all of that?"

Nick smirked down at him. "Takes a lot of food to keep these muscles going." He demonstrated by flexing his arms proudly. "Not like you'd know about that, of course."

Clay's jaw dropped and Nick doubled over with laughter. The soccer star spent the next few minutes alternately muttering at his bacon and flexing at Nick. His roommate chewed studiously on the inside of his cheek. Clay cast about for a way to end the humiliation.

"You said you had something to tell me."

Nick looked up from his eggs. "I did?"

"Yes! Now what is it?"

Nick's hazel eyes lit up. "Oh yeah, I remember."

Clay waited impatiently. Nick wiped his mouth on a napkin and leaned back in his chair.

"I ran into your *friend* last night while I was on the West Bank."

Clay felt his eyes widen. "George? You talked to George?"

"Yep."

"And he didn't burn your face off?"

Nick gave him a stern look. "No, he didn't. He was very sweet, actually."

Clay stirred his cereal absently. "So...what did you guys talk about?"

His roommate replied with his usual candor. "You."

The bite of Cinnamon Toast Crunch that had been residing in Clay's mouth suddenly found itself displaced. Nick made a face at the partially-masticated food on the table and covered it with his napkin.

"Take it easy. I didn't say anything bad."

"What did—what—what did you say?!"

Nick's hazel eyes bored into the soccer player's. "Clay. Stop. You're making a scene."

Clay sighed and sat back down. Without realizing it, he'd managed to stand up halfway. He returned to stirring his cereal, feeling hurt. Why had Nick gone behind his back like that? As if reading his thoughts, Nick broke into them.

"It was a purely coincidental meeting, Clay. Now are you going to listen to me or should I keep what I found out about him to myself?"

Clay sighed and waved his spoon. "Fine. Talk."

"All right. I'll cut to the chase. The big thing that I got out of the conversation was that he's afraid of what will happen once he gives in to you. He was kind of uncomfortable admitting it, but he's afraid that all you want is to win this chase you guys are having. He said, 'as soon as I gave in, he'd be gone'."

Clay stirred his cereal slower and slower as Nick talked. "He said that, huh?"

Nick nodded. Clay ground his teeth angrily. "He doesn't know that! He doesn't even know me."

The halfback's eyebrows lifted. "You don't know him, either. So why are you so sure you won't run away as soon as he gives in?"

"Because he's different!"

Silence followed this outburst. Clay cleared his throat and looked back down at his cereal.

Nick sighed.

"Well, if you'd stop attacking me, I could tell you that I defended you to him."

Clay looked up, the hurt look in his eyes shuffling aside as hope made an entrance. "You did?"

"Of course I did!" Nick grumbled irritably, "You're only my best friend, you know."

Clay's smile bloomed abruptly and he speared a piece of cantaloupe.

"So what did he have to say to that?"

"He called you a bonehead."

Clay snorted. "Figures."

Nick smiled briefly, then became stern again. "He also told me that you tried to kiss him on Friday."

Clay froze. *Damn it!* He started to defend his actions, but Nick cut him off with an impatient wave of his hand.

"Doesn't matter why you did it, just that you did. What's done is done, and I don't really want to know the details anyway. All that matters is how you two feel about it. He's confused and scared. Right after he told me about the kiss, he asked me if I thought that you'd dump him right away."

Clay frowned at the remnants of his bacon. "What did you say?"

Nick looked at him for a moment before responding. "I told him the truth: That I had no idea. I told him...that I thought you were more interested in him for who he was than with anybody else you've ever dated. I told him anything was possible. Then I asked him if he was willing to risk it."

Clay raised his green eyes to his roommate's. "Did he say yes?"

"He didn't give me a clear answer. He said he didn't know; that he wanted to avoid a bad relationship. He said that you're a lot like his high school boyfriend."

The silverware on Clay's plate clattered loudly as the star brought his fist down on the table. "Damn that guy! He's screwing this thing up at every turn!"

Nick raised his eyebrows. "He's talked to you about this guy before?"

Clay took an impatient swig of his water and slammed it back down on his tray. "Just heard about him in passing. Like, George will be yelling at me for being stupid or something and he'll say something like, 'You're just like Ethan'. Stuff like that. *Man*, I wanna beat this Ethan guy's ass."

Nick's eyebrows came up again. "You do? Think about it, Clay. Ethan had the same personality as you. He hurt your friend very deeply. Now you're learning from Ethan's mistakes. If he hadn't messed up, it would be *you* hurting George's feelings, instead. Would you want that?"

Clay frowned.

"No," he admitted.

"All right, then. You can beat Ethan up later. Now, though, just focus on what's at hand: My conversation with George. He was wondering what he should do about you, so I gave him some advice. I told him to wait a few more weeks for you to get your act together. He agreed that that might be a good idea. I bought you a few weeks, then. What are you going to do with them?"

Clay stared at Nick from across the table. What did he *mean*, 'what are you going to do with them'? Clay had no idea what to do about *anything* at this point.

"I don't know," he responded slowly, "I was actually planning on trying to get him to make the first move today in class."

Nick covered his face with his large hands and let out a snort of exasperation.

"Dude, there's no way that *that's* going to work. He's not *ever* going to make the first move. You're just going to have to suck it up and keep chasing him if you want him that much."

"Great. That's just great." Clay's annoyance was mounting. *Now what?*

Nick sighed. "Look, man. I know it isn't what you wanted to hear. I wish I could tell you something encouraging, but that's what he said."

"Yeah. I know." The soccer star gathered up his tray and stood. "I gotta get to class. I'll talk to you later."

"...So, honey, I think it would be better if you'd just stay in your dorm for this Thanksgiving."

George cradled the phone against one temple and an ice pack against the other, wondering why his family was such a bunch of psychos.

"Honey? Is that okay with you?"

"Yeah, mom, it's fine, it's fine. I'll talk to you later, then."

George dropped the blue phone onto the receiver and sank back on his bed. *You'd never guess that I was the one with the mental disorder in the family*, he thought with a grimace, fingering his bottle of Buspar idly. They didn't even celebrate Thanksgiving, but it was a great excuse to go back home to his family.

Two of the ovoid pills appeared in his hand, and the sophomore crossed the tiny room to his sink.

Well, fine. He'd stay here over Thanksgiving. The young actor straightened up and cast his gaze around the single room. That was fine with him. He could stay here and watch movies or do homework, or just sleep because it would be so quiet...

George dropped back on the bed with a sigh. Who was he kidding? Thanksgiving here was going to suck. Being alone was going to suck. Everyone else would get to go home and spend time with their families and eat lots of fattening food. He'd have to sit in his room while people called up and down the corridors to each other: "*See you in a few days!*" "*Have fun on the slopes!*" "*Do you have everything?*" "*Call me when you get there!*" "*Say 'hi' to your grandma for me!*"

The brunet grabbed his backpack off of the floor and ripped it open ferociously. He'd just sleep the entire weekend away, that was all. George cast his brown eyes around the room for his literature text and crammed it into his backpack beside his Introduction to Playwriting handbook. His play smiled up at him from between the leaves of the handbook. George glared back and zipped the backpack up again.

As he put on his black jacket, though, the angry feeling abruptly dissipated and the sophomore felt depressed. *This sucks.*

With a sigh, he decided to get over it. It wasn't like anything great would have happened over Thanksgiving anyway. A quick glance at his watch told him that it was time for English Language and Society. George shivered as he looked out into the November cold, and hoped that nothing else would happen today.

Clay stalked into the classroom, wondering why he'd worn these shoes today. He flopped down into his plastic chair and raised his feet to inspect them. The soles of the black Nike shoes were worn smooth, giving him no traction on the slippery half-ice, half-water substance that was coating the sidewalks outside. November in Minnesota was certainly a cheery time, the soccer star thought with a grimace.

He looked around himself and noted that, once again, he was the first person in the classroom. The empty desks stared back at him, mocking him for coming in without his group of admirers for once. Clay stuck his tongue out at one, then felt foolish. He faced forwards again and huffed at the clock. Twenty after nine. Where *was* everybody?

As if on cue, the door swung open and two quiet voices met his ears. Clay swiveled around to have a look. As he suspected, George had walked in, but... He was talking to someone! Clay felt his eyebrows elevate in astonishment. He'd never seen the other boy talk to anyone else before. Yet here he was, calmly discussing the book in his hands with Callahan, the neutral boy that Clay had met on the first day of class.

As the soccer star watched the other two take their seats, he felt a pang of jealousy. Why couldn't *he* talk to George like that?

Callahan spoke again, and Clay had to strain his ears in the empty room to hear what he was saying.

"...Got any plans for Thanksgiving?"

Clay was surprised to see George stiffen at the question, his jaw tightening. The actor forced a smile at Callahan and dug through his backpack.

"Nah," he muttered, "Going to stay up here."

Callahan lifted an eyebrow. "How come?"

George shook his head. "I would rather not talk about it."

Callahan nodded in his typically neutral fashion and buried himself in his book. Clay watched George dig through his backpack, his mind stirring. *Why aren't you going home?*

Clay felt a twinge of sadness as he watched the other boy pull out his play and begin writing on the last page. *He looks bummed.*

- *"I bought you a few weeks, then. What are you going to do with them?"*

The soccer star's eyes lit up abruptly as a beautiful idea unfolded in his mind. Would it work? He flipped his English notebook to a fresh page and began to write excitedly, jotting down the materials he would need. Now if only class would just hurry up and get done with.

Nick shot out of the futon in surprise as the door to the room flew open so hard that it *thwacked* against the wall beside it. His calculus textbook flopped onto the floor, pages fanning out in defeat. The halfback grumbled and stooped to pick up the textbook as his roommate cascaded into the room, stopping just out of punching range. Too bad.

"What's the matter with you?" Nick demanded, taking in Clay's appearance. It looked like the soccer player had run the entire way to the room from his last class: His face was flushed and that always-perfect hair was in complete disarray. He also seemed to be...fidgeting? With excitement? Nick backed away, slightly unnerved.

"Do we have construction paper?" Clay's voice was breathless and slightly higher than normal. His jade eyes darted around the room and his foot tapped impatiently as he waited for Nick's answer.

"Do we...have construction paper," the halfback repeated. At his roommate's vigorous nod, he sighed in resignation. "No, Clay. We don't have second-grade art materials in our room. What in the world do you want them for?"

Clay deflated rapidly and let out a noise that sounded suspiciously like "*BAH!*", then fled the room at an amazing speed. Nick remained standing in the middle of the room in surprise. As he sat back down on the futon, Clay's voice reached his ears again from down the hallway.

"Does anyone have any construction paper?!"

Nick couldn't help it. He spent the next five minutes curled up on the futon, laughing hysterically.

George trudged dispiritedly through the wet slush that undulated on the sidewalk outside of

Comstock Hall. Fifteen more feet and he would be inside the building...thirteen...nice, dry building...ten feet...bed...six feet to go...washers and dryers...*finally*.

The sophomore pulled open the doors of the hall and slid his UCard through the pass machine. The door to the East Wing clicked audibly behind him.

The trip to the third floor seemed to take forever. The ends of his dark blue jeans trailed desolately after him, sodden with a depressing combination of snow and mud. The journey down his narrow hall was even worse; doors stretched on for a millennium in front of him.

Why did today have to suck so much? The sophomore sighed to himself as he fumbled for his keys in the pocket of his black jacket. First, he'd been told that he couldn't come home for Thanksgiving, then a million people had called him on that fact, and *then* he'd had to walk home in this slushy goop while feeling depressed. Life sucked.

The sophomore yanked his keys out of his pocket and stomped around the corner that led to his room —
— and stopped dead in surprise. Something very big and *very* colorful was inhabiting his door. The brunet glanced up and down the hallway and cautiously inched forward. A long-fingered hand reached up and brushed against the soft, grainy material hovering just above his whiteboard. It was a construction paper turkey.

George's mouth drew upwards softly as he took in the colorful yellow and red feathers, the wide eyes, and the smiling beak of the holiday staple. His eyes were drawn to the belly of the turkey, where something was printed in black ink over the brown 'feathers'. The brunet squinted at the writing.

Gobble, gobble...Someone's thinking about you this Thanksgiving.

A small, warm balloon of absurd happiness was inflating in the sophomore's gut. With shaking fingers he gently pried the decoration off of his door. Light from the hallway flooded his darkened room as he entered and gently placed the turkey on his desk.

A rumble from his stomach reminded him that he needed food soon. Reluctantly, George grabbed his UCard and his keys. He cast one last look at the smiling paper turkey before closing the door softly behind him.

Maybe this Thanksgiving wouldn't be so bad, after all.

Chapter End Notes

IS THE SLOW BURN BURNING NOW???

I feel like squealing. This part was so much fun to write!

Leave you thoughts in the comments? :]

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50k hits pog<3

Courtesy and Courting

Chapter Summary

George quietly admits to his feelings, Clay reflects upon his behavior as of late

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

George smiled into the faded fabric of his old blue quilt. That damn paper turkey would not stop smiling at him, and he'd given up on trying to feel annoyed by it. Even now, the crudely cut ovular eyes beamed their innocent grin at him from across the room as if the two of them were speaking in some sort of secret code.

He'd taped the decoration to the back of his door so that he'd see it right before he left his room for anything. He found that every time that he saw the turkey before leaving, his spirits jumped an octave or two. He would leave the room content, ready to face whatever the day could throw at him.

The sophomore squinted across the room against the gathering darkness of late afternoon. He could still make out the scrawled note on the bird's belly:

Gobble, gobble...Someone's thinking about you this Thanksgiving.

George didn't need to analyze the handwriting to figure out who the gift was from. Who but Clay Dream paid *this* much attention to him? No one. His bandmates happily conversed with him on the practice field and invited him to all of their parties, but none of them would be stupid enough to send him a construction paper turkey. George barely knew the people from the Theater Club; he'd been to his first meeting only a few days ago and he was sure that none of them were quite this fond of him already. That left Dream as the culprit.

At the beginning of the semester, George would have considered this an obscene breach of his privacy; almost a crime. Now, however...the sophomore sighed and rubbed his eyes. Now he didn't know what to think. So Dream had figured out where he lived in order to give him a strange decoration. Was that creepy or sweet? Was he seriously starting to connect the word "sweet" with Dream?

George knew that he was starting to fall for the soccer star, but he also knew that there were sharp rocks at the bottom of the love pit that he was teetering on the edge of. His old feelings of denial and dissent were starting to fade; a sharp resignation was beginning to pool in their place.

The sun had set fully across the river. Only the whites of the turkey's eyes remained visible, still peering across the room through the darkness. George sighed and closed his eyes.

Soon, all he would be able to do would be to pray that Clay Dream wouldn't break his heart.

Clay had never hated his house before. He'd never resented his immediate family, nor his extended family, nor the annual Thanksgiving Day bash held by the aforementioned relatives. He'd never minded getting dressed up in dress pants, a nice shirt, and a tie before. Those things came with being part of a prestigious family. A member of the Dream family never resented any of those things.

Pfft, yeah. Clay drummed his fingers on the coffee table before him and stared across the well-lit living room at the endless ebb and flow of his extended family. Elder cousins chatted underneath the family crest on the opposite wall; their younger counterparts shrieked as they ran through the house, attempting to avoid the parents that would scold them for behaving so crudely. Aunts and uncles yakked candidly yet disdainfully about the stock market and the impact it would have on their businesses. His parents had disappeared, playing the part of the perfect hosts, his mother in pearls, his father in a tie with a glass of wine in his paws. His sisters had ditched him for their distant cousins. In short, Clay was left to fend for himself in this house of richly decorated boredom.

"Over the river and through the woods, to Grandmother's house we go!"

Clay could have cried. The younger cousins were still singing that stupid song! The past few hours had been riddled with endless renditions of the same holiday staple, and Clay was ready to throw the next kid that passed him out the window into the garden below. Somehow he doubted that this course of action was condoned by standard party etiquette, however. He'd have to find a more subtle way to deal with it.

"Hurrah for the fun! Is the turkey done? Hurrah for the pumpkin pie!"

Little Lydia flashed a hundred-watt grin at him as she rushed past, belting out the last line of the song in her childish soprano. Clay offered a weak smile in return and quickly tossed back the rest of his champagne. *What I wouldn't give to be back at the dorms.*

The thought brought him up short in surprise. Wait...he would rather be at the dorms, where there was nobody and nothing to do, than here at home, eating the always perfectly cooked turkey with his relatives? Well...yes, if it came right down to it. Just about any place was looking better than here, especially as the evening wore on and refused to die. Besides, George was back at the dorms.

Sometimes, Clay would give anything just to be part of a middle-class family that played Monopoly instead of Stock Market Trivia. Often, he found himself wondering what it would be like to be part of the mainstream, instead of the ruling class. Tonight he wished he was back at the dorms, eating the turkey sandwiches offered by the University Dining Services for those who couldn't go home. Anywhere but here.

"Clay! Come in here and tell Uncle Bob about your last soccer game!" His mother's voice was as relentlessly penetrating as a jackhammer. Clay sighed, set his champagne flute carefully on a coaster, and rose. He could feel Uncle Bob's gaze disdaining his slightly-mussed hair even from across the room. As he started towards his mother and his uncle with a carefully cultivated smile hanging on his lips, he had only one thought.

Anywhere but here.

What a relief.

Clay set his duffle bag against his upright suitcase and stretched in the cold sunshine of late November. He turned back to the street and waved enthusiastically as his mother turned back into East River Parkway.

When the rear lights of the Mercedes were no longer visible, the soccer star let loose a sigh of relief. He shouldered the duffle bag again and made his way to the front doors of Centennial Hall, suitcase bumping along behind him.

The broad entry hall of Centennial had never looked so welcoming. Clay fished his key out of the pocket of his well-worn letter jacket and inserted it into the lock of the door labeled 'East Wing'.

"Clay! Hey, Clay! Hold the door!"

Alex Quackity rushed up to the entryway, panting and red in the face. The suitcase ambling along behind the other sophomore looked like it could have held the contents of a science museum. Clay grinned and swung the door open, gesturing for his beleaguered friend to go through first. Alex cut him a strange look, then smiled hesitantly.

"Hey, thanks man."

Clay frowned. "What was that look for?"

Alex threw a glance over his shoulder as the two traversed the narrow hall to the elevator. "Oh, nothing," he mumbled. "Just...you never held the door for anyone before."

Clay let out a microburst of laughter. "What, are you kidding? Sure I have!"

The line for the elevator became visible as they rounded the next corner. Alex glanced back again as they leaned their suitcases against the wall.

"No...no, I've never seen you do anything like that before...look, never mind. How was the family this year?"

Clay gave his friend the standard rundown of the antics created by his extended family, but found that his heart wasn't in the tale as usual. Finally, it was their turn for the elevator. The ride up to the third floor was silent.

Clay stared at the numbers above the doors and wondered about Alex's comment. Had he really never held the door for anyone before? Not only that, but Alex had said 'never seen you do anything *like that* before'! Was it true?

The elevator doors opened on the second floor, and Alex brushed past him, flashing him a grin and a request: "Come play pool with us tonight!"

Clay agreed automatically as the doors closed. He rested his head against the metal wall of the elevator. *Was* he a selfish person? Why had he suddenly felt the need to hold the door for his friend? That wasn't something he usually did. Alex was right! So why had he done it?

The elevator dinged, signifying that the trip to the third floor was at an end. Clay pushed off of the wall and stumbled into the narrow hall. Students and parents alike brushed past him, hoping to catch the elevator going down. The soccer star strained to remember what he had been thinking of

earlier that afternoon.

Let's see...He'd arrived at Centennial. He had wondered where his key was. He'd wondered if all dorms used keys to get in, and remembered that Comstock used key cards instead. Then he had wondered who he knew that lived in Comstock, and then remembered that it was George. He'd felt a rush of energy as he thought of the other sophomore. Alex had called out to him from behind, startling him. For a brief second, Clay had confused the two, momentarily placing George in Alex's situation...giving courtesy a chance to get its foot in the door. He'd held the door for Alex before realizing what he'd done.

Clay became steadily more confused the longer he thought about it. Wait...this meant...that he wanted to be *courteous*? He made a distasteful face at the beige carpeting. He'd never felt the need for that emotion anywhere but at home, where, like the good host, he was always well-mannered. The University, however, was his kingdom. He didn't need to be polite here!

It seemed, however, that his mind had already made the decision for him. The soccer star felt a faint pang of defeat. If he wasn't so worn out from the trip, he'd have had a chance to be properly disdainful towards his new gentlemanly tactics. It was almost as if he was...*courting* George now; doing the whole opening of doors, pulling out of chairs routine.

Clay stopped dead in the middle of the hall, brow furrowing in consternation. He was *courting* somebody. Oh, gross. The levels he'd sunk to! *Courting* was old-fashioned, *courting* was for those people who had to suck up to their dates to hope for a second chance. *Courting* was not something Clay Dream had to do; he was far too popular, much too high in demand.

A voice abruptly bashed its way into his reverie.

"Hey, buddy, if you're not going to move forward, how about you move sideways and let the rest of us go?"

Clay slowly turned around in surprise and haughty disdain. He was about to give the perpetrators a tongue-lashing, but was abruptly bowled over instead. The speaker was holding aloft one side of a heavy-looking futon, and was apparently very interested in getting the piece of furniture to its destination. Clay was pressed into the wall as the futon passed.

"Hrmph," the soccer star snorted as he brushed himself off. He turned back behind him to pick up his neglected suitcase...and froze.

A pair of surprised topaz eyes stared back at him from a few feet away. Their owner took a step back and shifted the box he was holding to his other arm. Clay gaped for a moment, then attempted to unglue his tongue from the roof of his mouth.

"H-hey." Had he just *stuttered*? Oh, humanity!

George gazed back at him interminably before returning the sentiment. "Hey." The shorter sophomore's voice was different today; it was softer, less sure.

Clay cast about for something else to say. "Uh, what are, um—what are you doing here?"

The shorter sophomore held the box he'd been holding aloft abruptly, nearly dropping it in the process. "I'm, uh, helping a friend unpack...he's...uh, on this floor."

Clay nodded slowly, mesmerized, rooted helplessly to the spot. A small portion of his mind was initiating a dull scream, insisting that he was being ridiculous. Clay chose to ignore it. He was too busy watching the other boy, drinking in those beautiful eyes—*did he really just think the word*

'beautiful'?—the way the shorter sophomore was cradling the box in his arms, those eyes again...

"Well, I have to, uh, I have to get this stuff up to him."

Clay snapped out of his daze and stepped back out of the way. "Sure, uh...sure, go ahead."

George gave him a nervous smile and squeezed past with his load. Clay watched the black-jacketed form turn the corner at the end of the hall, then let out the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Residents of the hall gave him weird looks as they passed; the dazed expression on his face was quite abnormal for the star. Clay found that he didn't care.

Suddenly, *courting* didn't seem so bad after all.

Chapter End Notes

character development my beloved <3

hope you guys liked the chapter! leave a comment? :]

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All Cards On the Table

Chapter Summary

Clay's friends are suspicious of his recent change in behaviour, George performs on stage

Chapter Notes

i have a feeling some of you will hate me after this chapter... haha

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The pool table residing in the basement corridor of Centennial Hall smelled like must and sweat, as if it had acquired the scents of the boys who played on it regularly. Alex avoided this analogy; as a regular pool player who showered each day, he took offense to this comparison. He circled the table, eyes narrowing.

The sophomore blinked sweat out of his dark eyes and braced his fingers against the cue. He pulled the stick back and —

— *SLAM*. A hand came down from out of nowhere and rocked the frame of the table. The cue trenched itself in the dark green fabric of the pool table. Alex whirled around, ready to let the perpetrators have it.

"What the hell did you do that for?" he demanded.

Luke Williams brayed with laughter and whacked Alex on the shoulder with enough force to knock a horse flat on its side. He gestured behind him at the men filing into the small room.

"You getting in some extra practice before you face us?" Luke winked. "You're going to need it."

Alex snorted and leaned his battered cue against the table. "Like hell," he retorted, staring down his straight nose at the rest of the group. Wilbur Soot winked back at him as he chose a cue, and Jack Manifold bestowed his usual wolflike grin on the pool table as he removed his jacket. Wilbur picked the triangle up from its position on the floor and placed it carefully on the table. As Alex began to rack the balls up again, Luke spoke.

"So where's Clay at? He's not skipping out on us today, is he?"

Alex shook his head, removing the elusive 8 ball from the far pocket. "I told him about it this morning. He said he'd be here, but he was kind of distracted, so I don't know."

Luke grumbled. "He's been 'kind of distracted' a lot lately. Anyone else notice?"

There was a chorus of assent. Satisfied, Luke continued. "He's not being himself. Like, what's all of this new stuff he's doing in soccer games?"

Wilbur nodded wisely, his shaggy fawn hair swinging over his left eye. "Yeah, all that crap about thanking the fans and the band and stuff like that."

Alex interjected his two cents quickly. "He held the door for me today."

The news didn't elicit the wide-eyed reaction he'd been hoping for. The other sophomores simply nodded or grimaced. "Yeah, he's been doing that lately," Luke muttered.

There was a short pause as they deliberated who should break. Alex won the privilege and lined his cue up again. The balls scattered.

"Nice break," Jack muttered. Alex nodded, and Will lined his cue up.

"You know, it's not like it's a bad thing or anything..." Luke commented. "It's cool that he's doing that stuff, but I just want to know *why*."

Alex opened his mouth. "You know what some people are saying —"

"— That he's got some kind of major crush?" Will interjected. "Yeah, you gotta be kidding. Clay Dream, letting someone get the better of him like that? Yeah, right!"

"Oh, yeah?" Alex shot back. "What's your great theory, then?"

Will growled. The striped ball he was aiming for ricocheted off the side of the wall and nailed the black 8 ball. They let out their collective breath as it stopped just short of the pocket.

"Close, man," Luke reprimanded him.

"Shut up," Wilbur grumbled. "Look, I don't know what Dream's deal is any better than you do. I do, however, know how we can check whether it's a girl or not."

He looked over his shoulder at the entryway furtively, then motioned them all forward. The sophomores bent their heads over the pool table conspiratorially. Will spoke in a hushed voice.

"We make up some bimbo and tell him about her. If he shows up tonight, that is," the honey-brown eyed boy amended. "He used to get all excited whenever we had a new prospect for him. Why not try that tactic here? If he just gives us that vacant look he's been wearing lately, we'll know that something's *really* up."

Alex was skeptical. "How will that tell us whether or not it's a girl that's bothering him?" Will looked at him like he was bird-brained. "All of Clay Dream's problems—except for possible *love* issues—are solved by two things: Girls and alcohol. If he's not interested in the girl, that means his issue *is* love. Case solved."

Will smirked in a superior fashion as the rest of the group digested this line of reasoning. Alex smirked.

"That's going to work."

The group relaxed, and Jack grinned his wolflike leer again as he lined up his next shot. *Thwack!* A solid red ball rocketed into the pocket.

"Now we have to come up with what 'she' looks like —"

"*Shh!*" Luke interjected, putting his finger to his lips. The others strained their ears. A loud clumping sound was heading their way.

"Here he comes!" Jack hissed. They sprang back into their former positions, and were arguing over whose turn it was when Clay Dream entered the room.

"Hey, guys," the soccer star said calmly as he chalked up a cue. "What's up?"

"Hey, Clay," Alex returned. "We started without you, but we'll put you in the game behind Will. That means it's your turn now."

"Oh, okay, thanks."

Alex watched Clay line up his shot. The vacant look was still present, as were the quiet, noncommittal answers. Clay Dream was not all there today. It was time to implement The Plan. As Clay fired off his first shot, Alex made eye contact with Will, who nodded.

"So, Clay," Alex started.

"So, Alex," Clay laughed. Alex smiled nervously.

"So, Clay, there's this girl we all met the other day—*no*, not like that, you sick person. We *introduced ourselves* to her—stop it!"

Clay was now laughing hysterically at the perceived innuendos in Alex's words. Alex rolled his eyes in annoyance.

"*CLAY!*"

Clay wiped the tears from his eyes and lined up his next shot. "Sorry, sorry."

"God. Anyway, we think you should meet her."

Clay took the shot carefully. The striped ball missed the pocket by miles. The soccer star grumbled and straightened up.

"Oh."

Will, Jack, and Alex exchanged significant glances. Luke bent over the pool table and spoke as he eyeballed his angle. "Yeah, man, she's really hot. What's she look like again, guys?"

Oh, way to pass the buck, Alex thought. He opened his mouth and spouted off the first thing that came to mind. Unfortunately, Jack simultaneously did the same.

"Tall," Alex pronounced.

"Really short," Jack admitted.

There was a pregnant pause. Luke dropped his head in astonishment. Clay stared at them in confusion.

"Huh?"

They backtracked hurriedly.

"Sort of —"

"Tallish shortish"

"Medium, really."

"Yeah."

"Oh." Clay stared at them for a moment, then shrugged, seemingly convinced by their lie. Alex breathed out a sigh of relief. Jack took the reins.

"She's blonde, man, blue eyes, medium height, you'd like her."

Clay took up his cue again. "Oh."

Jack lifted his eyebrows. "Just 'oh'?"

Clay looked confused, then shook his head at the ball in front of him. "Yeah, man, just 'oh'. What's the matter with you?"

Alex decided it was time to take over. He reached out and pulled the cue out of Clay's hands. The soccer star straightened up and looked at them, fully comprehending the concerned looks on his friends' faces for the first time that night. Alex sighed.

"No, Clay, I think the question really is: What's the matter with *you*?"

Clay paused deliberately, as if to buy time. "What?"

Alex stiffened. He was done playing this game.

"You know perfectly well 'what'. What happened to make you suddenly hold the doors for people? Or to thank the *band* on national television, or to walk old ladies across the street?"

Clay looked affronted. "I have not helped any *old ladies* across the *street*!"

Alex rolled his eyes and Luke took over.

"Yeah, but you gotta admit, man, you've been acting weird lately. What about that day when you fell asleep in English Language and Society? I woke you up and you ran out of there like a bat out of hell! Since *when* have you cared about being late?"

Clay's face darkened. "It wasn't *about* being late."

"Aha!" Alex expelled. "Then what *was* it about?"

Clay's expression turned stony. "None of your damn business."

The room quieted for a minute. Alex sighed again.

"Look, man. I'm just—*we're* just—we're worried about you, okay? You're just not being yourself. Even when you're playing soccer you're not Clay Dream anymore."

Clay frowned and held out his hand for the cue. Alex reluctantly gave it up. The soccer star bent down again, but didn't take his shot.

"I am, too," he grumbled.

"Clay, you can't even convince yourself of that," Alex pointed out. He pulled Clay towards the computer sitting in the corner of the room. "Let's look at this then, huh?" He furiously typed on the keyboard and a news recording of last night's soccer game came on the screen.

It was the post-game show. The audience filed out in the background as the band played *Hail, Minnesota*. For a moment, the camera zoomed in on Clay Dream, splattered with mud, today carrying a water cooler instead of hamming it up for the fans. Alex raised his eyebrows at Clay. Clay frowned and looked back at the video playing in front of them. The picture panned off of Clay and focused on two announcers.

"Well, Jim, that was an exciting game today."

"You bet it was, Steve, and Clay Dream is at the front of the excitement as usual."

"Yes he is, Jim! It looks like the Minnesota star is trying out a new strategy—instead of always taking it in by himself, he's passing the ball to other players. It's worked so far: Although Dream still led the goal-scoring for this game with three goals, he assisted in four more! That's more than Minnesota has made in a long time."

"Yessiree, Steve. Looks like Clay Dream's becoming not only a better player, but a better teammate. That's something you don't see that often in college sports, and it's a refreshing thing to see. We'll be watching Mr. Dream's career even more closely now."

Alex clicked on the mouse and paused the video. He evaluated Clay's sulky expression before trying again.

"Clay, you're still the same ass you used to be. There's no denying that. You still act like you own the campus, and you do. That's fine; everyone loves you for that attitude. It's just...you seem to be beating yourself up about something. It's almost like you're *changing* yourself for something, and if this is all just because of some *guy* —"

Clay's head shot up and he gave Alex an alarming look. "Who says it's about some *guy*?"

Alex backtracked. Why *had* he said that? "I —"

Clay gave a rapid, slightly hysterical giggle. "What *guy* would make me do this? It's not about some *guy*! A *guy*? Please!"

Alex narrowed his eyes in sudden suspicion. "...Sure, Clay."

The soccer star huffed and turned back to the table. Wilbur caught Alex's eye, and Alex motioned towards the door. Wilbur nodded and gave a fake yawn.

"Well, I gotta go. I'm beat."

The other boys cottoned on and made their excuses as well, citing homework and girlfriends as reasons to cut off their pool time. Clay frowned.

"Aww, man."

Alex laughed. "Don't worry, Clay. I'll stay and play for a while."

After the door had closed behind the three sophomores, Alex stepped up to the plate again. He watched as Clay circled the table and bent over his target. His mind raced furiously, searching for the proper ammunition. His suspicion was growing exponentially as he considered his theory. *What's that guy's name? The one in our English class...the one that always fights with Clay...he's british, and short...? Davidson, was it...?*

He waited until Clay had lined up his shot perfectly to spring the trap. The soccer star braced his

cue against his hand and pulled back twice. He towed the cue back once more. Alex leaned down. Clay's shoulder tensed. The cue started its descent. Alex made his move.

"George." He whispered in Clay's ear.

The cue hit the blue and white striped ball with a sickening crack, and Alex ducked instinctively as the ball careened wildly out of the table. It collided with the far wall and dropped miserably to the floor.

Alex opened his eyes again and straightened up. "...Clay?"

Clay was still frozen in position. The soccer star drew in a deep breath and uncurled his body.

"What did you say that for?" The soccer star's voice was a desperate attempt to be casual.

Alex stared. Clay avoided his gaze, looking instead at the blank wall ahead of him. In an instant, Alex knew.

"I said it because...you like him," he whispered.

Clay didn't move.

"Dude."

Clay still refused to move.

"*Dude*," Alex emphasized. Clay finally looked at him. Alex smiled in response.

"It's okay, you know. To like him. Weird, since it's a guy, but then you've always liked guys a little more than girls."

Clay sighed. "You really think it's okay?"

Alex frowned. "Sure, why?"

"Because," Clay smiled slightly maniacally, "Because if this keeps up you may not see the old Clay Dream anymore. He might just go away forever, just because of one...stupid...guy."

Alex leaned against the table. "You know what I think?" He didn't wait for a response. "I think that I like all sides of Clay Dream, and that the side of Clay that holds doors for overburdened friends and passes the ball and helps old ladies... well, that might not be such a terrible side for you to give in to."

Clay put down his cue. "Yeah," he muttered. "Maybe."

Alex smiled at him. "I'm gonna go now, alright?"

"All right. I'm going to stay and shoot for a while," Clay returned.

Alex looked over his shoulder at the soccer player as he left. Old Clay Dream was an alright guy, he thought, but the new Clay Dream? He was something else.

George sighed as he slouched in his cushioned chair and tried to battle a headache. Sometimes play practice drove him right up the wall. Anders Christian had called a full-cast rehearsal, though it was only the third week of production. He'd wanted to see how the cast members 'bounced off of each other'. George shook his head as the girl on the stage belted out the wrong lines. Though he respected Anders Christian and his methods, he couldn't believe how much time was being wasted here.

The sophomore shifted slightly. The movement upset the delicate balance that his screenplay was maintaining on his knees, and he had to reach down quickly to snag it before it hit the floor. He righted the stapled pages and looked down on them, trying to block the girl's nasal voice from his ear drums.

Quotation Marks, commented the front cover. *An Inspirational Play by Anders Christian, Co-Produced by Paul Kincaid. Starring: George Davidson.*

"All right, Ms. Nihachu. That'll do for now, but for the next rehearsal, perhaps you'll learn your lines. Who is up next?" Anders frowned at his already-marked up screenplay. Paul Kincaid answered from the right wing of the stage.

"George's up again. Act II, Scene 2...he's about to sing *My Grave*."

The frown on Anders Christian's face melted away and he turned in his seat to smile at his star. George felt a warm swooping sensation in his stomach as he stood up and wove through the supporting cast to get to the stage. He'd made a point to practice his part, and it showed through today. Anders Christian was impressed.

George liked *Quotation Marks*. His character, Ezekiel, was a high school senior who had recently been diagnosed with Acute Leukemia, a terminal disease. The musical centered on the stages of grieving that Ezekiel and his family were going through: The stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The song he was about to sing was a tricky transition between the 'depression' and 'acceptance' parts of the play. Many characters gave brief appearances, but it was basically a solo play: It was his character against the disease, the clock, his death.

George stepped into the spotlight and cleared his throat a few times, waiting for Paul to give him the go-ahead. The supporting cast milled around in small clumps throughout the auditorium. They'd started out quietly listening to each other, then realized how long it was going to take for everyone to get through their part. Now anyone who wasn't on stage stood in a group and talked as whoever *was* on the stage performed. It was slightly disconcerting, but George was okay with it. He had talked briefly with a few of his cast mates, then sat in a chair towards the back of the auditorium.

Anders Christian looked up from his notes and smiled again. "Ah, George. Back on stage, back on stage. Let me see..." The old man pushed his pencil into his lower lip, distorting the appendage. George tried not to laugh.

Anders Christian looked up again. "This one is a bit tricky; I want you to go for a harsher sound this time. Most of the song is at the lower end of your range, so if you would kindly just dig in there, yes, that would be good. Um, let me give you an example. Have you seen *The Nightmare Before Christmas*?"

George nodded. It had been a favorite of his ever since he'd seen it when he was a kid. Tim Burton was a genius that he'd felt connected to immediately. Burton's frequently trapped, bipolar characters had spoken to him, especially the character of Jack Skellington. Even after more than a decade, that movie was still relevant, at least to him. He shook himself back into reality as he

realized that Anders Christian was still speaking.

"Do you remember the part where Jack has just been shot down by the cannons, and he lays there in the cemetery? Where he's singing, you know, *'What have I done? All is lost! In a million years they'll find me, only dust!'* I want you to sing like that. Imagine you're Jack. You're sad, guilty, angry, but over all, you are accepting your situation. Do that."

George smiled. Anders Christian pointed to Paul, who nodded. George dropped his screenplay to the floor and closed his eyes. He could feel the cemetery set looming around him. Dark monuments faded into the scraggly, black trees as a single spotlight pierced the gloom. Ezekiel stood before a patch of earth, a rose in his hands. No headstone crowned the blank patch: The person who would later inhabit it was still alive.

Ezekiel's voice carried a capella, over the unmoving audience.

*"This, this is my grave?
But it's so earthy
So dark and dirty
A final resting place is this. How frightening."*

Ezekiel's voice deepened, harshened. Anders Christian sat up straighter and rested his hand in his fist. The solo baritone continued, quickening the tempo. Shorter, angrier notes punctuated the broad vibrato.

*"What will happen on the day that I'm gone?
Will they cover me with a sheet and then play some mahjong?
Or will they tag my toe and shiver from the cold
That is my skin, my eyes, my heart, my bones?"*

A pause. The audience shivered as Ezekiel spoke, voice eerily and distantly contemplative.

"I can see the funeral now."

The song returned, quiet, softly, short staccato notes. A gentle crescendo accentuated Ezekiel's vision. A coffin slowly lowered from the ceiling. Mourners slid in from the wings of the stage. Water dripped miserably from the eaves.

*"A dark rainy day, the kind I despise
And sleet comes shooting down much to the surprise
Of the dark clad people standing there,
Above my coffin, standing right over... here."*

Ezekiel held his rose aloft and threw it on to the coffin. The audience followed its graceful trajectory with their eyes, shivering as the impact made a hollow 'thud'. The petals crumpled into the dark wood.

*"I see a dark but vibrant rose
A small girl wiping her runny nose
Some high school kids looking so uncomposed
Another rose, another rose, so many roses..."*

A dozen roses dropped from the ceiling. Ezekiel's mother wailed mournfully in F sharp. Ezekiel heaved for breath.

*"As my death hovers in the air
My heart contracts in harsh despair
I don't want to die, but I'd really like to know why
I deserve to be laid to rest right **there**!"*

A heavy beat of silence filled the auditorium. Ezekiel stared out into the seats. He spoke, finally, his voice gravelly with pain and grief.

"Oh, well. I won't really be there to see it anyway, will I?"

Another beat. Another beat. The baritone voice sang the final three words, D D E.

"So who cares?"

.
.
.

The lights blacked out. Ezekiel bowed his head.

"Very good! Fantabulous!"

George started and came out of his daydream. It was like surfacing for air after an extended period underwater. He breathed in deeply and focused. Anders Christian was applauding against the dull rumble that was the collective voice of his peers. Paul Kincaid flipped a switch on the stage light panel, and the spotlight faded, replaced with the usual rehearsal lights. Anders Christian stood up and strutted to the first row of seats, then perched on an armrest. George sat down on the front of the stage and swung his feet over the edge.

Paul flopped down beside him, mopping his forehead with the sleeve of his flannel shirt. He grinned at the sophomore between wipes. "That was great, George. Really great. You cracked a little bit on the high A on *'there'*, but that can be fixed with a better warm-up pattern."

Anders Christian broke in. "You did just what I asked you to by adding a harsher sound to this song. Now I simply need more of it from you. We'll work on that in the warm-ups as well. You have a good dig in the low notes. This is going to be a fantabulous production; I can feel it in my bones! Yessiree!"

Anders stood up again and twirled his arms around his head as he went back to his seat. George and Paul laughed and slid off of the stage. Paul bumped the sophomore in the back with his clipboard.

"You can go home, now, George. He's not going to make you do more than that."

George nodded and picked up his black jacket from its resting place on a spotlight. A feeling of content swelled in his stomach as he swung the doors to the auditorium open and stepped out into the cold night.

'Fantabulous', indeed.

Clay hated English Language and Society.

The soccer star grumbled as he splashed through the decomposing leaves of late November. There was a reason for his current mood, and it wasn't just the prospect of another exciting day of *The Grapes of Wrath*. The cause of his irritation was the *Minnesota Daily*'s headline for the day.

Clay snarled angrily as he passed a newsstand bearing the paper. The glaring black letters burned their way into the back of his head as he marched towards Lind Hall: "**CLAY DREAM HAS BEEN REPLACED BY ALIENS!**" screamed the obscene, large-fonted headline.

He had *not* been 'replaced' by an alien! The very idea!

The sound of giggling reached his ears, and Clay swiveled his head to find the source. It didn't take much searching: As soon as his eyes landed on a group of staring girls, they quickly buried their heads in the open papers in their arms. Clay growled irritably and pulled up the hood of his green sweatshirt. *Welcome to the dark side of popularity*, he thought with a sigh.

Clay found that he couldn't muster the vigor needed for his usual treatment of the English Language door. Instead, he merely leaned on it. The door swung open with a quiet click, and he shuffled to his seat, feeling rather depressed. Feeling the now-familiar sting of amused eyes on the back of his head, he whipped around and glared at the source.

"You know what, George? I don't care if you think that the article in the *Daily* is funny! It's not true! I'm not an alien!"

George gaped at him for a moment before retaliating.

"I don't read the *Daily*!" he snapped impatiently, "It's editorial trash and everyone knows it. Even if I *had* read your article, I would not be inclined to believe that you're an alien."

Clay opened and closed his mouth like a fish before turning back to the front of the room. Something caught his eye, however, and he turned back.

"What are you wearing under that stupid black jacket?"

George's jaw dropped. Clay realized his mistake too late and backtracked.

"No! I didn't mean it like *that*! Sheesh. I mean, are you really wearing a letter jacket under that?"

"...Yes." George said finally, "I am. Would you like to *see* it or are you just going to trust me?"

Clay huffed. "What's it for, then?"

George pursed his bowed lips as if struggling to remain civil. "Band," he responded shortly, before going back to his book.

Clay processed this for a moment, then let out a sharp, explosive bray of laughter. George's head shot up again. The temperature in the room plunged. Clay knew that he was treading dangerous waters, but the morning's events had erased the few shreds of sensibility that he possessed.

"*Band*?" he spluttered helplessly, "You can get a letter for the *band*? Band's not a sport!" The soccer star laughed hysterically, holding his sides and gasping for breath.

"SHUT UP!"

Clay froze with his mouth half open and stared at the sophomore across the room. George's Fire Agate gaze was narrowed in absolute fury. Clay had seen that expression only once before: When he'd pinned George to the desk in the beginning of the semester. The soccer star straightened up and braced himself, then struck back.

"Why should *I* shut up? I've been getting laughed at all day; it's my turn to laugh at someone else!"

George half-rose from his seat in fury. "So you make fun of my *band* letter? Is that it? Why are you doing this? You were so nice to me just a few days ago!"

Clay felt a stab of guilt, but his anger masked it instantly. He narrowed his eyes to slits and hissed through a clenched jaw.

"*Sure* I was nice to you a few days ago! I've been trying to be nice all week! You just refuse to see it! You have to be all holier-than-thou and be like, 'Oh, I'm George and I've had bad experiences with some idiot in high school! I'm so depressed about it and I'm never going to give anyone a chance! Boohoo!'"

George's eyes widened and an alarming look crossed his face. He let out a long, slow hiss, and Clay felt bumps rise on his arms. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

"You know what, Clay Dream?" the shorter sophomore spat, "I was actually thinking about giving you a chance when you taped that turkey to my door. I thought, oh, he's actually a sweet guy underneath his façade! Before I threw myself at you, though, I had this thought that you might just be acting to get what you want. I was right, *wasn't I?*"

"You were right about *what?*" Clay snarled, straining forward against his desk.

"*You!*" George shrieked back. "You're just *acting* to get what you want!"

"Oh, yeah? How do you know that I'm 'acting'? How do you know that we wouldn't be good together? You've never even given me a chance!"

"I *know!* You want to know how? Just look at what we're doing now!" George's voice suddenly dropped off. He sank back into his chair, looking exhausted and sad. "Look at what we're doing." Clay lowered his eyes. George sighed and reached for his notebook.

"We would never work, Clay, because you will *never* understand what I need you to be."

Clay lifted his eyes again and gazed at the other sophomore. Strangely enough, it looked as if the ice-cold George was blinking back tears. Without another word, Clay turned back to the front of the classroom and opened his book.

One...two...three, he thought. On cue, the door of the classroom swung open and the rest of the class filed in, looking as if they'd just witnessed a car wreck. Though they carefully avoided eye contact with both Clay and George, Clay knew that they'd heard every word.

Alex sat down beside him, sympathy etched into his eyes. He clapped Clay on the shoulder. "You okay, man?" he murmured.

Clay gave him a tight smile that came out as more of a grimace. "Just doing my part to validate the headlines."

Alex smiled and took out a sheet of paper, while Clay did everything he could to look straight ahead.

Chapter End Notes

THIS IS THE LAST TIME THEY FIGHT I PROMISE

anyways. did ya like it? the musical bit took sooooo long

-> will there be more of theater george? ;)

please leave a comment, for the love of The Nightmare Before Christmas (and dream coming out yesterday /j /j)

[twitter](#) & [tumblr](#)

Love on the Sidelines

Chapter Summary

A conversation with a friend gets George reflecting upon his recent behavior

Change, realization, and (perhaps) love is on the sidelines

Chapter Notes

well well new readers, i hope you like angst jumpscars :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sleet screamed down from the slate-colored clouds oscillating above the Pride of Minnesota Marching Band. Soaked tennis shoes met expansive puddles as their owners struggled to carry out commands. Instruments sputtered in the thirty-four-degree weather; the flutes and clarinets had already abandoned their horns in the clubhouse and carried representative sticks instead. The drum major stood on a ladder with a gasping megaphone and shouted over the storm.

George spat filmy sleet water from his mouth and raised his trombone to his lips, legs coming up and down in time with his line. He winced as his horn blatted out an odd note. No one noticed; no one could hear anything, anyway.

The drum major abruptly threw down his megaphone and drew his hands across his throat. The hubbub died out as the three hundred band members rushed towards the relative safety of the clubhouse.

It was a tight fit. The clubhouse had originally been built for the girl's softball team, who played on the baseball diamond directly behind the band's practice field. George found himself jammed into a corner underneath the only window of the small structure. The wind whined outside the glass panes. A flute player passed, yelling about the price of keypad replacement these days.

"Heya, George."

George looked up in surprise, then straightened up in order to make room for Karl Jacobs. The taller trombone player grunted as he stuffed himself into the small space.

"Thanks, man."

George simply nodded and rested his head against the faux brick of the clubhouse walls. After a few moments, the side of his face started to burn. Karl was staring at him for some reason. George's irritation grew until he couldn't remain silent anymore.

"What?!" The sophomore snapped. Karl stepped back in surprise and collided with the wall. Rubbing his head ruefully, the taller boy stared back at George deliberately.

"Just wondering what's up with you, is all."

George stared at him. "What do you mean, 'what's up' with me? Nothing's 'up' with me."

Karl arched an eyebrow. "Sure, and there was nothing 'up' with Sylvia Plath, either. Dude, you're acting weirder than usual. I just wanted to know why."

George closed his eyes. What was Karl talking about? "What makes you say that?"

Karl held up his calloused fingers in front of his face.

"Hmm, let me think," the taller boy muttered. He began to tick off the reasons on his fingers as he spoke.

"First and foremost, you've been downright friendly the last few weeks." Karl held up his other hand as George started to object. "Shut up. Yes, you're always decent to everyone in the band, but it's obvious that you don't want to be best friends with any of us. You're a lot friendlier now, though. You're actually letting people *talk* to you! You never used to be open to even simple conversation. You only used to tolerate band stuff or quick questions; you'd just stand away from everyone else and play your trombone. Don't deny it; you've been joining circles of conversation a lot more, recently."

George was silent for a moment, then retaliated. "That doesn't mean anything."

Karl raised an eyebrow and elevated his fingers again.

"Then let's count some more! What's also weird is this daze you're starting to walk around in. Ask anyone from our section, you've been incommunicado lately. What about the other day when you started playing the Rouser instead of Hail, Minnesota? Aha! I thought so. So, in conclusion: You're less focused. You're less snippy. You're more open to conversation. In fact, you're downright friendly! Yes, George Davidson, something is 'up' with you. If you don't believe me, I have four fingers that disagree with you."

He wiggled them in front of George's face. George focused on the digits for a moment, then looked away. His line of sight was suddenly blocked by the face of his persistent friend.

"So," Karl smirked. "Who is he?"

George almost fell over. He shifted his trombone to his other hand and shot Karl a shocked look.

"No—no one, there's no *'he'!*"

The sophomore mentally kicked himself. The most gullible person in the world would not have believed him, and Karl Jacobs was far from gullible. The other boy's grin reached Cheshire cat proportions.

"Sure, George," he said in an 'I'll-humor-you' kind of voice.

"Really!" George insisted, even though his argument was rapidly deflating.

Karl's smirk abruptly melted off of his face until he looked almost serious. He reached out with his broad hands and rested them on George's shoulders, turning the other trombone player to face him.

"You know what I think?"

George eyed him warily. "What?"

Karl looked down at him calmly.

"I think it's cute. I also think he's gonna be a lucky guy. Dude, don't argue with me anymore." He held up one of his hands to stop George's sputtering argument, then dropped it back into position.

"You can deny it to yourself, but I am a master of the arts of love, and you can't fool me. Now listen. You may not have realized that you're changing, but you are, and you'll realize that soon. I just thought that you should know that I did the same thing when I met Jennifer. You may get completely whipped, but it's not a bad thing at all."

George found that he didn't have anything to say. He looked straight ahead of him and noticed with some relief that the drum major was motioning people back outside and into the elements. He picked up his trombone again and threw a quick look over at Karl.

"All right," he said. "Thanks."

Karl laughed. "Sure."

They stepped out into the wind again. The air whistled through their horns, making a weird howling noise. Both boys laughed and hooted back at their instruments. Niki gave them a weird look as she ran past, her mellophone dangling from her hands.

The drum major signaled again, and they strained to hear him over the wind.

"Pregame, Star-Spangled Banner set through Cascade!"

"Damn," Karl muttered. "I'm all the way over at the other end." He waved at George and started to trot away. George turned and headed for the 20-yard line marker, blowing air through his horn to warm it up.

"Wait!"

George turned back. Karl was jogging back up to him, looking breathless.

"You never told me who it was!"

George deliberated for a moment, then smirked. He turned away and tossed his response over his shoulder as he ran for his mark.

Karl stared after him, dumbfounded.

"Clay Dream?"

Clay Dream. It all came down to Clay Dream.

George stripped quickly in the darkness of his single room, then wrapped a towel around his waist and headed for the showers. Rainwater still clung tenaciously to his pores. The sophomore shook his head, spraying the walls of the hallway with the dirty liquid. *Yuck.*

The warm water of the shower was a relief. George tilted his head forward and hissed softly as the stream hit him exactly between his tense shoulder blades. He leaned against the shower stall's wall

and let the water work its magic.

Clay Dream.

Was he really changing himself for Dream?

George shook out his dark hair and rubbed shampoo through it. He hadn't noticed himself acting oddly, yet his conversation with Karl indicated that he had been. Karl wasn't one for practical jokes. He had been telling the truth, George was sure of it.

So that was it. He had let the brain-dead, arrogant soccer star under his skin, and *look* what had happened. He had changed. Nearly completely.

George reached up and fingered his right ear lobe gingerly. Metal scraped against his fingers. He had pierced his ear last night. Had he done so in order to *impress Clay Dream*? Sure, the small diamond stud was pretty, but he'd never felt the urge to have one before he'd met the soccer star.

Great. Just great. George rolled his brown eyes and turned the shower off, grabbing his towel again. He padded his way to his room and flipped on the light. The sophomore discarded the towel and pulled on his favorite pair of jeans. As he was rummaging through his closet for his shirt, however, something bright in his peripheral vision caught his attention.

He straightened up and gazed into the trash can. The paper turkey lay languidly on top, staring back up at him in confusion. George sighed and pulled it out of the waste bin, then crossed the room and sat on his bed with it.

Last night he'd come home in a sort of depressed fury. He'd finally decided to give Clay Dream a chance, and then...

-"Oh, I'm George and I've had bad experiences with some idiot in high school! I'm so depressed about it and I'm never going to give anyone a chance! Boohoo!"

The humiliation and confusion that filled him after those words was indescribable. He'd done the only thing he could think to do: Retaliate.

-"We would never work, Clay, because you will never understand what I need you to be."

George stared off into space and wished with all of his heart that it wasn't true. A rustling brought him back down to earth. The turkey's brightly colored feathers were waving in the warm breeze of his radiator. George couldn't help but smile at the construction paper ornament that was looking up at him so sweetly.

Maybe he'd reacted too harshly. After class that day, he had made a point to grab a newspaper. The headline would have amused him if he hadn't been so upset.

"CLAY DREAM HAS BEEN REPLACED BY ALIENS!"

The brunet snorted as he recalled the article. Something about Dream acting oddly lately; passing

the ball in tournaments, walking around in a daze, being in general...un-Dream-like. George supposed that if *he'd* had that kind of article written about him, he'd have been looking for someone to take it out on as well. So maybe he could have gone easier on the soccer star. The thing was...

He could have handled it if Dream had only insulted his band letter. He was used to those kinds of insults; he got them all the time. The 'boohoo' taunt about his past, however, had hit a big nerve.

His fingers traced the turkey's eyes even as a bitter smile twisted his lips. Clay Dream didn't know the half of it. Even after all that Ethan had put him through, George still missed him with all of his heart.

The timer on his desk beeped shrilly, and George set the turkey gently on his desk before crossing the room to his sink. The familiar pills appeared in his hand.

"—never going to give anyone a chance—"

Could he give Dream a chance?

George looked down. It would take a lot of patience. A lot of time. A lot of work. If he was going to give Dream that chance, however, the soccer star was going to have to meet him halfway.

The sophomore shook his head. Like *that* would ever happen.

No. Clay Dream might make great paper turkeys, but George couldn't afford to fall for another playboy. Not after what had happened last time.

Clay dropped onto the futon and pouted. He just couldn't *believe* the thoughts that were running through his head. The previous day's events had been driving him crazy ever since he'd left the classroom, and he was now officially ready to scream.

Guilt was the worst feeling in the entire world. Clay rarely felt it; his status as the Golden Boy allowed guilt to slither off of him like water off of a duck's feathers. Now, however... Clay's feathers had been plucked.

He buried his head in his hands and let out a soft roar. Everything about George was so *different!* Always, *always* when Clay said or did something around the other sophomore, he felt so exposed, so...normal. When he communicated with George, it seemed that his good looks mattered so very little; his status, even less. He was just another person negotiating his way into someone else's heart. So *this* was what it was like to be Everybody Else. He couldn't say he liked the feeling.

Clay dropped his hands into his lap again and caught sight of the time on his watch. 7:25 a.m. Why wasn't Nick out of the shower yet?

As soon as the thought crossed his mind, the door to their room opened, and his roommate charged through, already fully clothed. Before Clay had time to marvel at this feat, however, Nick was

dragging him out of the room.

Tailgating parties either got progressively crazier or exponentially deader as the season went on, depending on how the football team was doing. This year was a crazy one; the Gophers were 7-1 in the Big Ten and 9-3 overall.

Clay stood at his grill, turning the brats carefully. These babies were going to be perfect, even if it killed him. His shaggy, blonde-highlighted hair fell into his eyes as he concentrated, chewing his lower lip. Maroon-and-gold clad fans rushed back and forth between the tents and trucks; the parking lots of the Metrodome were in an uproar. Today, The Ohio State University of Columbus would meet its demise at the hands of the Golden Gophers.

"Clay! Clay!"

Clay shot up in surprise. The brat he'd been poking fell to the ground. Clay swore violently and looked around for whoever it was that had disturbed his cooking. He didn't have to look far; Alex had materialized and skidded to a halt inches from the grill.

"Man, be *careful*! You made me drop a brat!" Clay admonished his friend, holding his hands protectively above the sizzling meat. Alex glanced down at the brats and shook his head before looking around himself like a spy would. Clay stared. Alex, seemingly satisfied that there were no secret agents in the vicinity, finally looked back at his friend, leaned in close, and spoke in a hushed, conspiratorial tone.

"The *band* is coming."

Clay waited for two beats to make sure that he'd heard right, then let out a snort of laughter. Alex looked affronted.

"What are you laughing at?"

"You!" Clay gasped between convulsions of laughter. "'The band is coming.' It's okay, Alex, I don't think they're going to hurt you."

Alex glowered at Clay for a moment before slapping his hand over the soccer player's mouth. Clay stopped laughing long enough for Alex to make his point.

"George," Alex said softly.

Clay pushed Alex's hand away, looking confused. He turned back to the grill and turned the brats over before responding.

"Why'd you say that? First, you say 'the band is coming' and then you say 'George'—*oh!*"

Alex waited patiently for the meaning of his words to sink into Clay's brain. The soccer player's eyes went wide for a moment as he comprehended what Alex was saying, and he glanced towards the parade route with a conflicted expression. Alex smiled.

"Go, man. I'll watch your brats for you."

"Well..." Clay hedged. "All right, thanks."

He pulled off the apron he'd been wearing and handed it to Alex, who rolled his eyes and tossed it on a chair. Clay was about to admonish him when the first notes of Minnesota March reached his ears. The soccer player paused for a moment, then sprinted towards the parade route. Alex laughed and turned back to the brats.

"GO GOPHERS! Hey-yo! Min! Ne! So! Ta! Min-ne-so-ta! Minnesota! Hey! Rah-rah! GOPHERS!"

Clay craned his neck as he heard the cheers echoing against the outside of the Metrodome.

Minnesota flags whipped in the wind and spectators roared along the clogged parking lots and parade route. Clay had to cover his eyes abruptly as the sun reflected off of something metallic and into his eye. When he looked up again, the band had rounded the corner and was charging toward him. Clay felt a strange shiver of excitement. He craned his neck and narrowed his eyes and hoped...

There he is! Clay felt silly for a moment, but disregarded the feeling as his gaze fell on the person he was looking for. A small, goofy smile spread across his face. Aw...George looked so *cute* in his uniform. Normally Clay would avoid such unmanly thoughts, but that was the only way to describe it. George obviously hadn't noticed Clay on the sidelines, and seemed to be completely engrossed in his band cheers.

What's so different about him today? Clay wondered. It wasn't that he looked much different, despite the uniform. He hadn't dyed his hair or anything like that, though there was a band-aid taped over his earlobe. Clay frowned for a few more seconds before it dawned on him. *He's smiling!*

That was it! George was genuinely smiling; it looked like he was having the time of his life. He wasn't as quiet as usual, either. In fact, as the trombone section passed Clay's position, the soccer player could distinctly hear George over the other people in his section.

"Eat up the Buckeyes! Eat 'em raw! Eat up the Buckeyes! Eat 'em raw! Eat up the Buckeyes! Eat 'em raw! Eat up the guts, spit out the bones, march on!"

Clay opened his eyes wider and laughed out loud. He'd never taken the time to even look at the band, never mind listen to their cheers. He'd never cared before now. The flutes and piccolos were now passing him, and Clay was getting an earful of *Minnesota March*, high woodwinds style. The soccer player shook himself out of his daze, suddenly aware of how weird he must have looked, standing there and staring at only one player. He blushed and turned back towards the tailgating party. Soon it would be game time.

The inside of the Metrodome was on fire with maroon and gold, bracketed by blocks of red and white. Clay took his usual seat in the student section, beer and hot dogs in hand. The band had just

finished its pregame show and was now filing into the seats labeled '*Band*'. Clay collapsed into his seat and was about to bite into his hot dog when a shadow loomed over him. He was about to tell the unknown person to stop hovering, but before he could turn around, a strange, sparkly substance was tossed all over him.

"Yuck! *Alyssa!*"

There was a high-pitched giggle and then Clay was suffocating as Alyssa threw her arms around his neck.

"Hello, lover-boy," she winked at him as she took the seat beside him. "What's new? You haven't talked to poor Alyssa in forever!"

Clay grumbled as he wiped the pixie dust off of his hotdog. Alyssa fixed her slightly disconcerting gaze on him and waited for an answer. Clay sighed.

"I know, I know. I'm sorry."

Alyssa flicked the pixie dust at him again. "I accept your apology. Now, what are you looking at?"

Clay barely heard her; his gaze was fixed on the band section again. The trombones had just filed into their spots in the stands and were gulping down bottled water. Clay sighed again.

Alyssa traced his gaze to his target. A slightly evil smile spread across her face and she abruptly elbowed Clay in the ribs.

"*So!*" she exclaimed. "You're still stuck on your band boy!"

Clay snapped back to reality.

"Shh!" he insisted. "People are going to hear you!"

"Oh, bollocks," Alyssa replied. "Everyone's too drunk to understand me, anyway." She rifled around in the enormous purse at her side and withdrew a pair of binoculars.

"What are you doing?" Clay hissed.

"I'm looking for your *boyfriend*, Clay Dream!" She replied brightly.

"Oh, no." Clay buried his face in his hands.

"Where's your *boyfriend*, Clay Dream? Oh, I think I see *Clay Dream's* boyfriend! Oh, Clay Dream's *boyfriend* is *cute*! Aw, look at Clay Dream's boyfriend with his widdle trombone! Haha!"

Clay couldn't take it anymore. He stood up to leave, face on fire, but Alyssa latched onto his arm.

"Where are you going?" she demanded, making imploring puppy dog eyes at him.

"I'm leaving!" Clay huffed. Alyssa pulled on his arm.

"No, don't go! I'll be good, I promise." Her evil smirk seemed to guarantee otherwise, but Clay really didn't want to miss this game. He sighed and relented. As he sat back down, however, he noticed that many people in the vicinity were staring at him, then looking away quickly and whispering to their friends.

"Great, look what you've done," Clay whispered despondently. Alyssa's response was an

unrepentant giggle. Clay was settling back in when someone poked him in the back. He remained facing forward, hoping it had just been accidental.

"Hey!" Another poke. With a long-suffering sigh, Clay turned around.

"What?!"

An obviously inebriated middle-aged man was laughing at him. "Is it true?"

Clay frowned. "No, it's not true! She's making stuff up!"

The man lifted an eyebrow. "So you don't have a special someone?"

"No!" Clay snarled angrily. He dropped his voice and muttered glumly, "He keeps rejecting me."

Alyssa looked up at him sympathetically. The drunk, however, had found a nugget of profound wisdom in his alcoholic daze, and he seemed determined to share it.

"Know what I think?" The man leaned in. Clay tried not to breathe. Oblivious to his pupil's discomfort, the drunk continued.

"It's a bad feeling when someone you love rejects you. Know what, though? They're always worth it."

Clay looked back at the man, who nodded wisely. The soccer star faced forwards again. Alyssa smiled discreetly beside him. As the Buckeyes punted the ball, Clay rose along with the rest of the student section to cheer the Gophers on to another victory. His heart, however, wasn't in the game. As the band let a cadence loose, Clay's eyes traveled back to the trombone section.

"Know what, though? They're always worth it."

Chapter End Notes

only the real ones would remember Jennifer from chapter 6 /lh

HELLO forgive me for making y'all wait so long I had a *very* busy month. As an apology, I offer three MORE chapters (six chapters left woooo)

Anyways, did ya like it? i would love to know your thoughts! (pinky promise I'll respond)

Will do my best to update weekly! :)

[twitter](#) & [tumblr](#)

Fever Dream

Chapter Summary

Three nightmares and a dream; what is on Clay Dream's mind?

Chapter Notes

dream-centric chapter, for finn glittering ant <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Clay dropped gingerly onto the checkered futon and rubbed his throbbing feet in despair. The football game had been the best one of the season, and as such, had required the student section to be on their feet at all times. Clay grimaced and swore to himself that he'd never get up again. Upon consideration, he took it back. Nick would be home from his team's post-game victory talk soon, and they would definitely be celebrating when his roommate returned.

"Yeah, baby!"

Speak of the devil.

Clay laughed and high-fived Nick as his sweaty roommate blew through the door of their room. The football player raced to the window and proceeded to proclaim the Golden Gopher's victory over the Ohio State Buckeyes to the entire campus. Clay laughed and pulled a shampoo bottle toward him, mimicking a microphone.

"Hark, the triumphant Daredevil Defenseman, Halfback from Hell, the one, the only Nick Armstrong! Yes, ladies and gentlemen, this man truly is a football stud!"

Nick ricocheted out of the window frame again and posed with his muscles flexed. Clay tried not to choke with laughter as his roommate strutted around the room. Post-game Nick was very different from the sage-like entity that occupied Nick's bed most of the time. This guy was insane.

Clay allowed his spine to meld with the futon again. He picked up a magazine and flipped through it idly before looking back up at his roommate.

"So where are we going to celebrate tonight?"

Nick shrugged as he pulled off his soaked t-shirt. "Alpha Gamma's having a hog roast. 'Hog roast'. Meaning 'beer'."

A wide smile crossed Clay's face.

"Let's go."

After four hours of shots, fake smiles, and genuinely trying to have fun, Clay had to admit to himself that he really wasn't into this party at all. Alpha Gamma's 'hog roast' seemed pretty trivial to the usually happily drunk soccer star. His mind kept wandering to subjects that he didn't want to think about tonight, and it was distracting him from the amusement of the alcohol and the girls and boys around him. It wasn't fair—he was supposed to be having fun!

Clay sighed melodramatically before discreetly checking his watch. Only ten o'clock? He lifted his head again and accidentally locked eyes with a honey blonde girl who was standing by the remaining keg. She smiled in a seductive manner and began to weave her way through the crowd towards him. Clay felt a twinge of panic. *Not another one...!* Since that damn article had come out, it seemed that even more girls were now on the hunt for a piece of Clay Dream. No less than eighteen of the female species had tried to talk him up in the few hours that he'd been at this party.

The soccer star wildly evaluated the room for an escape route, then made a mad dash for the front doors. Through shots of alcohol and swaying bodies, he wove before the entryway greeted him. He turned the massive knob on the oaken front door and flew out onto the brick steps below. The slam of the door behind him reverberated through the darkness.

Whew.

The freezing night air sent needles into the pores of his face. Clay stood on the stoop for a moment, then shoved his hands deep into his pocket and began his long, ambling trek back to the dorms.

Hundreds of stars twinkled back at him from their beds in the night sky. Wispy bands of clouds haunted the moon's gaze. Clay tilted his head back as he walked; the alcohol thrummed through his veins and made the night sky seem alive. He whistled 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star' quietly, then dissolved into a fit of giggles.

The buzz began to wear off as the soccer star turned onto Delaware Street. He straightened up and forced his face into a serious expression as a cop car rolled past on silent wheels. A blue-clad arm waved at him as the vehicle passed. The front doors of Centennial Hall rose out of the ground ahead of him; still stumbling slightly, he pushed his way through them.

I'm so tired.

His shoulder connected with one of the massive columns that adorned Centennial's lobby. The minor blow stopped him short, forcing the inebriated sophomore to take stock of the situation. *Wha-?* He stood for a moment, blinking in his stupor, then pushed off of the structure and wandered to the door of his wing. His U-Card magicked itself into his hand and through the card reader. The door swung open and Clay began the treacherous journey to his room.

Corridors upon corridors mocked his muzzled mind, and Clay began to feel more depressed with every step he took. Outlandish complaints began to run through his mind, and by the time he reached the door to his room, he was feeling completely disheartened.

Why didn't anybody want to walk me home?

The soccer star chose to ignore the fact that he'd run out of the building for his very life, not giving anyone a chance to help him back to his dorm room. With a melancholy sigh, he closed the door

behind himself and contemplated the emptiness of his room. Flipping off the light, he pulled off his shirt and pants and fell into bed.

I wish George would have been there...he could've walked me home.

As his head sank into the soft pillow, Clay smiled to himself.

George...

His eyes fluttered closed and he began to dream.

The lecture hall was eerily quiet. Clay stood in the front of the middle row, staring at the blank chalkboard. The gleaming clock above the professor's desk kept track of the seconds relentlessly. Faint footsteps resounded behind him, then the creak of the old wooden door. Clay finally found the strength to turn around.

George favored him only with a cold glare; he crossed the room to his desk and shrugged off his black jacket. The movement reminded Clay strongly of a prizefighter peeling off his robe before a match. George's trombone landed on the desk in front of him. Clay was startled out of his daze by the tip of his finger, which had caught on a groove on the desk in front of him. He looked down.

G&C 2gether 4ever. *Clay stifled an urge to laugh. Whoever had written that must really have been head over heels. Damaging University property was so ninth grade. A distant shuffling of papers reverberated in the silence of the room.*

George was now sitting in his chair. The oddly filtered sunlight was fighting a thin layer of dust that seemed to be coating the large window under which George sat. The meager glow illuminated the boy in front of him, however, and Clay found that he couldn't breathe. George's dark hair was infected with strands of gold; the full curve of his lower lip stood out against the sun's rays. He shuffled the papers of his play impatiently, searching for something.

Clay couldn't stand it any longer. He opened his mouth and said—something. His brow furrowed. Clearing his throat, he tried again. Though he could feel his vocal cords flex, though his lips moved, Clay could hear no sound. George, however, looked up. Clay tried again, forming the words he wanted to say. Though he couldn't hear himself speak the syllables, apparently the other boy could.

George's cool gaze melted slightly, and, encouraged, Clay pressed for more. His lips formed words but his ears refused to listen. It didn't matter, though; George could hear him when no one else could. The shorter sophomore was now standing, leaning against his desk. Clay became more excited, gesturing to enhance his point. He began to lose himself in his own conversation. Distantly, he registered George's dark amber eyes freezing over again.

Sound began to return. Clay heard snippets of his own voice like the streams of song and talk on a badly tuned radio. The segments of sound became longer and more attached to each other as Clay elaborated on whatever he was saying. It was like being himself and watching himself from the outside at the same time.

Suddenly, a bright light filled the classroom. The dust coating everything evaporated, and the sun poured through the now clean window like a massive vial of fiery liquid. Color flooded back into the gritty classroom; the markings on the desk below him gleamed. Clay's ears finally tuned back

in again, but only at the end of his own sentence.

"— you."

'You'? What had he been saying before that? What was 'you' about? Clay felt frustration boil in his gut. Whatever he'd said couldn't have been good, at least not judging from George's expression. The smaller sophomore was letting out that long, slow breath that Clay now knew meant that he was in trouble.

Suddenly, Clay's stomach lurched. His eyes fluttered closed for a moment and a feeling of extreme vertigo passed through him like a cold wind. He shivered and snapped his eyes open again before looking around himself in surprise.

Though he didn't remember moving, he was now seated in his chair, twisted halfway around with his arms braced around him. Gloomy clouds now pushed against the window upon which the sun had just been shining. George had been standing previously, but now was seated, straining across his desk with an expression of absolute fury on his face. Clay shuddered as an intense feeling of déjà vu permeated his mind. So many times now had that look been directed at him.

As he watched, however, George sank back in his chair. The incensed light had gone out of the other sophomore's eyes; now, he simply looked tired and hurt. George spoke lowly and with resignation. Clay strained his ears to catch the words.

"We would never work, Clay Dream, because you will never understand what I need you to be."

Clay abruptly remembered where he'd heard this before. A memory, this was a memory from only a few days ago! Next, the class would file in, and he would be saved from having to make a response. He stared into George's eyes and waited for the door to swing open. A few moments passed. Nothing. The silence stretched on until George made a soft, sad sound in his throat. The shorter sophomore rose and picked up his jacket with one hand, his trombone with the other. He evaluated Clay through disappointed dark eyes.

*"What are you waiting for?" he demanded. Clay jumped at the accusatory tone; he searched for an answer but found that he didn't have one. **I'm waiting for someone to come in and rescue me!** his mind screamed back, **I don't know what to do!** His mouth, however, refused to transmit the message. George shook his head in despair and took long strides to the door of the classroom. Clay followed him with his eyes. George paused in the doorway and looked back.*

"Clay, I can't —"

"Wait!"

George paused as Clay took in a breath, the first breath he'd taken in over a minute. The soccer star lurched from his seat and took two tentative steps towards the other boy.

"...Just wait," he murmured.

George's eyes became sadder still. "I can't wait, Clay. This was your last chance with me. You messed it up. I can't wait anymore! I have to go. Clay, I loved you, but...I can't."

They locked eyes for a long, silent moment. Jade met obsidian, but the message was long lost between them. George turned and brushed through the threshold of the classroom. The door swung closed behind him with a sharp, final click.

Clay stood in the front and center of the classroom as if he was giving a speech to the empty desks

and lonely chairs. The clock ticked relentlessly behind him; the clouds parted and filmy sunlight illuminated the dusty classroom once again. It was exactly as it had been at the beginning of this dream, except...except for the one piece of the puzzle that could never be replaced.

His vision suddenly became blurry; the sunlight blended together until his sight was limited to streaks of brown and gold. Clay brought his hands up to his face and felt wetness. He...was crying.

He was crying for something he'd lost and could never get back again.

Clay surfaced from the dream like a swimmer coming up from the sea; with a sharp shudder and a gasp he shot up in his bed. The moon streamed in from a crack in the curtains; it fell against the checkered pattern of his quilt. His quilt. It was night, not day, and he was lying in bed, not standing in a quiet classroom.

A dream. It had only been a dream.

Clay passed a hand over his eyes and blinked for a few moments before his body was able to tempt him back into the realm of sleep. He slowly lowered himself back onto his pillow. A strange blob of wetness met his cheek, and he shot upwards with a surprised yell. Feeling slightly foolish, he prodded the spot gingerly with his fingertips before moving the pillow into the small stream of moonlight. A fist-sized dark spot now adorned his pillowcase. Clay felt it one last time before realizing what it was.

A patch of tears.

He was too tired to figure out what it might mean. With a sigh, he fell backwards into sleep once again.

The campus was ablaze with early spring sunlight. Students were lazily tanning or 'studying' under the wide branches of blooming trees. Cars with open windows wound through the campus on Washington Avenue, and an ultimate frisbee team practiced on the patch of grass between the Administration building and the Liberal Arts center. Clay waved at several of the frisbee players as he passed them. One waved back before colliding with a tree. Clay laughed and continued on.

The plaza in front of Northrop Mall was speckled with students reclining on the plastic tables and chairs that magically appeared there every morning. Clay chose a diagonal path through the medley of forms in order to avoid the Reagan protesters that were stationed at the corners of the area.

Clay suddenly felt a thrill of recognition as a form threaded its way through the plastic furniture and toward him. He waved and increased his pace until he reached the person's side, then held out his hand.

"Hey, man, how's it going?" he laughed. "Long time, no see!"
George smirked as he shook the proffered hand. "Yeah, sorry. Been working a lot."

Clay waved mock-dismissively. "Ah, you and your plays."

The shorter sophomore quirked an eyebrow. "Yeah, yeah. I know you, Clay Dream. You pretend to have no appreciation for the theater, but have you ever missed one of my plays? Hmm... I don't think so! Are you coming to Cosmopolitans?"

The soccer star put his hands on his hips and attempted to look stern.

"Of course I am! You think I'd miss a chance to see one of my best buddies in action? Not a chance!"

He punctuated this last phrase with a proprietary wave of his hand. George's smile grew; Clay felt his own spread in time with it. George gestured vaguely in the direction of Smith Hall.

"Well, I gotta get going."

"Sure," Clay replied, holding out his hand once again. "I'll see you opening night!"

George shook it, then smirked over his shoulder as he trotted off. "Just remember a rose this time!"

Clay laughed, remembering his profane breach of stage etiquette with the last play he'd gone to. He watched George's retreating form. A dark feeling unlaced itself in his heart, but he fought it down with what appeared to be years of practice.

You screwed it up, Clay, his conscience replied to his unspoken question. He gave you a fair chance and you abused his trust. You lost your opportunity with him. Just be glad he's letting you remain friends with him.

As Clay watched, a tall, blond boy ran up to the retreating George and bumped into him. He could hear George's bell-like laugh all the way across the mall. The dark feeling pulsed again as the blond form laced his fingers through George's. With a savage growl that made passersby look up in surprise, Clay turned away from the scene. He shouldered his backpack and stormed off towards Nicholson Hall.

He's not yours anymore, Clay. One day, you'll have to get over it.

Nick turned the key with a soft click and opened the door quietly. A smile spread across his face as he noted his roommate sprawled out over his bed. The football player changed silently out of his clothes and made for his own mattress before a soft cry of distress stopped him short. Furrowing his brow, he leaned over his roommate.

"You okay, man?" he murmured quietly.

An expression of great distress was etched into the face of the sleeping form. Nick reached down and punched his roommate on the shoulder lightly.

"Hey. Hey! Wake up."

After the third repetition, Clay's emerald eyes cracked open. For a moment, he stared at Nick uncomprehendingly. Worried, Nick waited for any kind of response.

"Nick?"

"Hey, buddy," Nick said in a soothing voice. "You were having a nightmare."

Clay lifted his head with what looked like a monumental effort, then dropped it back. "He doesn't blame me? I didn't screw it up?"

"No, buddy, you didn't screw it up. Go back to sleep."

"Okay."

Clay's eyes fluttered closed again. Nick stared at him for a long minute before climbing into his own bed.

What's going through your mind, Clay Dream?

Snow swirled in little gusts, first one way, then the next, so that there was no way he could defend himself against it. In the end, he simply stopped trying and just let the white flurries embed themselves in his hair and the exposed skin on his neck. His rear was freezing to the black iron bench that he was sitting on. He turned his head to face the person beside him.

George looked ahead of them at the face of Northrop Auditorium. His dark hair was mostly covered by a Minnesota snow hat; his face was unearthly and still. Clay itched to cause the immobile sophomore to move, to make an expression, to do anything at all, yet he remained still. As he watched, George exhaled softly before speaking. Clay had to strain to hear the words over the wind, though he was only a foot away.

"What is it you want, Dream?"

Clay deliberated on his response. George remained facing the Auditorium; it was as if, in a way, he was afraid of Clay's answer. Finally, Clay decided just to go with the simple truth.

"I think...it's you."

"You want me." It was a question and a statement all at once. Clay didn't need to reply; George already knew the answer.

"Then tell me..." The shorter sophomore's voice dipped lower. Clay strained to catch it. "Tell me that you love me."

Clay froze, though he couldn't tell why. It was such a simple request, such an easy thing to give. Yet...consternation filled him. Why?

George's chin lowered slightly, his gaze remaining locked on the building ahead of him. The gesture was a flag of defeat; the other sophomore knew the thoughts running through Clay's head. He seemed simply...resigned, and though Clay felt like an ogre, he still couldn't say what George needed him to. The reason remained just out of reach; the more he strained to figure it out, the more it eluded him.

George stood; the crunch of the new fallen snow was masked by the howling wind. Without looking back, he walked down the snowy path, hands deep in the pockets of his black jacket. The wind whipped up and covered Clay's field of vision with a solid wall of white. When it subsided, George was gone.

Clay draped his arm across the back of the bench and looked at the snow. Suddenly, the reason for his hesitation hit him full-force.

For all of his girlfriends, boyfriends, one night stands and Sam, from sorority girls to frat boys to that one brief fling with the guy from the Institute of Technology... None of them had been important enough to elicit that certain response.

For all his experience in the field of love, Clay Dream had never in his life said, "I love you."

Clay awoke suddenly to a large snore. He blinked rapidly in the darkness and frowned. Nick's hand was draped over the side of his bed and was now dangling in front of Clay's face. The soccer star fought the urge to laugh. He stood up and gently took hold of the hand, positioning it next to the face of its owner. Nick snorted lightly in his sleep and turned over. Clay grinned and sank back onto his own bed. He sat cross-legged, picking at a spot on his quilt and watching the clock in front of him.

3:31 a.m.

Ugh. It was way too early to conceive of getting up anytime soon, yet Clay desperately wanted to avoid sleep. Three nightmares so far tonight, all of them torturous. Clay felt that if he had one more bad dream about George, he might just die.

A funny pattern traced itself into the beam of moonlight across Clay's bed. He looked up, then parted the curtains for a better look. A soft smile suddenly crossed his face. *Snow.* Big white flakes were spiraling down to the cold November ground below. Clay's smile widened. He'd always loved snow, ever since his first snowman.

The sophomore dropped back on his pillow, still watching the fluffy pinkish clouds overhead releasing their snowflakes. *Happy thoughts, Clay,* he told himself. *Dream of something happier.*

Bass music throbbed through the floorboards of the band house. Three hundred sweating bodies swayed to the beat of the rock n roll. Neon lights pushed back the darkness of the room; the alcohol was flowing fast from the taps along one side of the room. Clay wasn't paying attention to any of it.

George moaned softly into his mouth, and Clay pushed him harder into the wall in response. He ran his fingers over George's back and was rewarded when the shorter sophomore reached up and entangled his hands in Clay's blond-highlighted hair. Clay couldn't remember the last kiss he'd gotten that had even come close to this.

The music thumped louder through the house and voices passed their position in the small nook of the band house. Clay broke off the kiss gently; George made a soft, desperate sound and tried to pull him back.

"Shh, baby, let's go somewhere more... private," Clay murmured. Something in George's eyes

sparked. Clay shivered and threaded his fingers through the belt loops of George's jeans.

"What are you —"

"Shh," Clay repeated. He locked eyes with his boyfriend, mesmerized by the perfect amber gazing back at him. He pushed against George, backing them up into first a dark, narrow hallway, then through the first door he saw. He cast a quick look around the empty room and smiled internally. George tried to twist around to see what he was looking at, but Clay pulled him close and refused to let him look. The shorter boy laughed bemusedly as Clay continued to back them up until they hit the soft side of a bed.

George released a thrill of laughter and Clay kissed him fiercely, trying to absorb the sound into his own body. He pushed forward again, bracing his hands on either side of George on the mattress. He could feel George smiling into his kiss as he lay them down; crushing the shorter sophomore into the bed with his weight, he sank into the blissfully oblivious feeling that could only be described as 'kissed stupid'. George wrapped his arms around his neck and broke the kiss gently. Clay opened his eyes and looked down at him in confusion.

"What is it?"

George smiled up into Clay's eyes and carded a hand through the soccer star's hair. He leaned up and whispered into the curve of Clay's ear.

"Tell me you love me."

Clay smiled and leaned down to whisper the well-used phrase into his boyfriend's hair.

"I love you."

He was almost blinded by the intensity of George's smile. He laughed softly and shook his head at the boy below him before leaning down once again and sealing his lips over George's.

Clay's eyes slid open for the final time that night. He lay listening to the sound of the snowbound wind against his window, a warm bubble of content lifting him up. The clock's face was embossed with a softly-lit 5:26 a.m. Clay regarded it until the numbers changed to 5:27 a.m, then made his decision. He closed his eyes and thought only one thing before giving in to sleep once more:

He had to win George over. No matter what.

Chapter End Notes

HELLOOOOOO i am late again but the wait was (hopefully) worth it :thumbs up:

i LOVE this chapter

Dream FINALLY admitted he is in love with George. When will George look past the playboy?

hope y'all liked the chapter ^-^ it is literally my favorite
i would LOVE to hear your thoughts <3

[twitter](#) & [tumblr](#)

Quotation Marks

Chapter Summary

It's the opening night of George's play tonight!

Chapter Notes

ik i said weekly updates but i literally got hit by a bus lol whoops

i haven't proofread it so apologies for any mistakes

edit, 6/12/21: i'm fine haha that tweet blew up

edit, 22/2/22: mom i'm famous

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

George stood under the spiral stairwell of the dimly lit catwalk, script in hand. He closed his eyes and released a gust of air, expelling the backstage dust from his lungs, trying to find calmness within himself. He'd done this so many times, he could do it again. Techies and actors alike scurried like so many ants around his position; it made it difficult to relax when everyone was yelling and freaking out about nothing. It was, however, a staple of life at the theater.

Quotation Marks would open in seven hours.

Anders Christian and Paul Kincaid were everywhere at once, noting last-minute repairs needed for the set, prodding reluctant actors into position, checking and rechecking the lighting. George kept his head down and his limbs out of the way; the last thing he wanted to do was trip a techie and get an earful right before he had to perform. Ruefully, he rubbed the back of his head where he'd taken the bad end of a two-by-four earlier that morning. A powerful welt was forming; he touched it gingerly with his fingers and was about to go get an ice pack when Anders Christian materialized in front of him.

George jumped. The old man could really move, despite the frail appearance he projected. Anders Christian looked quite haggard at the moment; George prepared himself for anything. So far he'd managed to avoid being yelled at by the stage manager, yet he felt that if he didn't respond quickly enough this time, his luck would run out. He looked up expectantly.

Anders Christian smiled. George let out a mental sigh of relief as the old man clapped a bony hand to his shoulder.

"Ah, George. Still, under the catwalk, I see? Surprisingly good acoustics there, yes indeed, yes indeed. Well, my boy, are you ready for tonight? We'll give you one last warmup, run through *My Grave* and *Death Is* one more time, and then you can go home and eat."

George nodded silently and trailed Anders Christian out of the stairwell and towards the spotlight circle on the stage. The old man jumped off of the stage and sat in the front row. The piano started up; soft, staccato notes filled the room and chased away the dull rumble from the backstage area. George cleared his throat and closed his eyes.

Clay felt like a fool. He'd never in his life gone to the Rarig Center for the Theatrical Arts, and yet here he was, standing in line for a *play* of all things. And why? Because he thought it would impress George.

The sophomore sighed dramatically and stepped up to the ticket window. The teller evaluated him with surprised, overly plucked eyebrows bracketing wide brown eyes.

"Clay Dream," she stated smoothly as she held out a hand for his money. "I didn't know you were a fan of the theater."

Clay unleashed the lie he'd thought up on the way here. "Yeah," he laughed. "Well, it's for a grade in my English class. See, we have to go to some sort of art appreciation thing, so I thought I'd check this play out tonight."

The eyebrows projected skepticism, but their owner just nodded and handed him his change, along with a dark green ticket.

"Well, if it's appreciation you're looking for, you'll find it tonight," she informed him suddenly. "There's an amazing new talent making a debut in this play; I've heard that it's going to be spectacular."

She motioned the next person forward while waving him off.

"Enjoy the play, Clay Dream."

The theater was packed. George stared out at the full house from the wings of the stage, unable to comprehend that so many seats could be filled in such a short amount of time. The ushers were even bringing in metal folding chairs usually meant for the pit players. There were even students sitting in the aisles. A weird lump formed in his stomach and he ducked back behind the curtain quickly.

His heart nearly jumped out of his chest when a hand suddenly descended on his shoulder with a loud clap. He wheeled around and then relaxed. Paul Kincaid lifted an eyebrow at him.

"Little nervous there, George?"

George laughed. "Who, me? Never."

Paul smiled soothingly. "Don't worry about it; I know you've never seen an audience this big. We definitely hyped you up around campus and the Twin Cities. We were expecting this."

George was too shell-shocked to reply. Paul eyed him knowingly and continued.

"You've got amazing talent, George. One of the best I've ever heard. You could get on Broadway, for Heaven's sake. Just go out there and do your best, and don't screw up or I'll kill you."

Paul added a wink to this last statement and George laughed again.

He would get through it. He always had. After all, all he had to do was sing.

Clay huffed impatiently as he wound his way through the metal chairs packing the aisle. He held his ticket up to the dim lights, then scanned the area around him for his seat. *K-14, K-14... There!* With a sigh of relief, the soccer star flopped down in the plushy maroon chair. His green eyes automatically scanned the audience around him.

They were nothing like the people he usually observed. Young and old were packed together happily, all dressed in formal clothes with strange tweaks, speaking in excited low tones about something. Clay narrowed his eyes. Probably something to do with the 'new talent'.

He flipped open his program, idly wondering which part George was going to play. He hoped it wasn't *too* bit of a part, because he might not be able to see from here. The dark letters embossed on the inside of his program proclaimed:

Quotation Marks, a Tragedy by Anders Christian and Co-Produced by Paul Kincaid.

Clay groaned and slunk down further in his seat. *A tragedy?* Tragedies were always sloppy messes with a lot of wailing. He cast a longing look past the ushers at the doors leading to the lobby of the building. *Why* was he sitting here looking for a guy who probably barely had a part in a play he really didn't want to see? By now Clay's eyes were level with the top of the seat in front of him. He flipped open the program again.

Quotation Marks is the inspirational journey of a high school senior, Ezekiel, who has been diagnosed with acute leukemia. The five acts of the play comprise the five stages of grieving: Outright denial. Inexhaustible anger. Desperate bargaining. The depths of depression. And finally, the relief and peace of acceptance. The actor playing Ezekiel makes his debut in the Theater Club's performances tonight.

Clay frowned. *Hum.* Well, it didn't sound *too* bad. It was certainly unique. He scooted back up in his seat as the lights dimmed and rose twice, a warning to the audience to get in their seats. The room fell silent. The stage darkened. A dark form moved across the blackened stage to the center. A single spotlight blasted through the darkness. The actor looked up. Clay felt his jaw hit the floor.

George hit his mark perfectly and froze. The spotlight poured its baleful gaze on his dark head. He lifted his face to the light and gave the audience the doe-like look that Paul had practiced with him for so many hours. He threw a glance left, then right, as if astonished to find himself the object of the scrutiny of a full auditorium. The audience followed his movements with surprise. George

strode forward two steps and tilted his head at the audience, a bemused smile tugging at his slightly bowed mouth.

"Uh... hi. Where did all of you come from?"

Some of the less theatrically experienced audience members turned to each other, wondering if this was really the play, or if some guy had just randomly walked onto center stage.

George righted his head and waved his hand, still wearing his perplexed expression.

"Can you see me?"

When no one in the audience made a sound, he cupped his hand to his ear.

"Hello? I said, can you see me?"

A few brave souls shouted their assent. George dropped his hand and flashed a sudden, dazzling smile at the crowd.

"Wow," he laughed. "That's pretty cool. You really shouldn't be able to. See... the thing is... I'm dead."

He paused and stared out over the prone audience. More than a few surprised eyebrows were suddenly hiked up higher than usual. This was an unusual opening indeed. George smirked internally.

"Yes, dead. Dead as can be. That's why I'm so surprised that you can see me. I wonder... I wonder if I'm being given a chance to tell my story, then."

He paused thoughtfully and then shrugged his shoulders in acquiescence.

"Let me introduce myself. My name is Ezekiel Matthews. I died yesterday in St. John's Hospital of acute leukemia. I didn't mean to. Believe me," he laughed dryly, "I tried as hard as I could to live. But in the end, some things not even the human spirit can defeat."

The audience was already hooked. George stared out over them in resignation.

"Maybe you can benefit from my experience, however. I learned so much in the half-year I was given to live. So follow me, and I'll teach you what I learned."

The spotlight shut off suddenly. The stage was swathed in blackness once again. An eerily calm voice drifted over the crowd, low and powerful and already bringing with it an inevitable conclusion.

"This is my story."

Clay could only gape at the figure on the stage.

"This is my story."

He tore his eyes off of the newly darkened stage and flipped his program over hurriedly. The

previously ignored cast list flew into his hands, and he held it up close to his eyes in the dim light. He didn't have to search long for the name he was looking for—it was right at the top of the list.

George Davidson... Ezekiel.

He could only laugh softly in amazement. *Wow. So **you're** the 'new talent'.*

Clay sat back in his maroon seat and watched the unfoldings with new eyes. Maybe he really *would* enjoy the show.

For the next two hours, a powerfully enlightening story unfolded, equal parts dark and light. The audience sat transfixed in their seats, glassy eyes taking in the events on the stage. Clay was no less enthralled; though his limbs were becoming filled with pins and needles, he didn't dare to move them.

Ezekiel, an average high school senior with an average GPA, was dying quickly of acute leukemia. The disease became more evident as the play went on. The audience followed the dying boy with sad eyes. Family and friends of the character interacted briefly with him, usually invoking stereotypes from the outside world. Ezekiel mocked one such character, labeled the "You're-gonna-be-okay" guy, with the casual cynicism that could only come after one's encounter with death had been decided already.

Much to his shame, Clay felt tears in his eyes at more than one point in the story. He wasn't alone, however. At the intermission, eyes were being wiped all around in response to a song called *Death Is*. Now they sat again, hearts stirred after the haunting *My Grave*. Ezekiel had accepted his fate. Act Five opened and passed in a flurry of goodbyes between Ezekiel and his classmates, his best friend, his teachers, his parents, and his little sister.

The finale opened in a flood of white light. Every actor from previous scenes was now on the stage, looped in a horseshoe pattern around a softly lit coffin. High above the mourners, a small balcony built high into the stage wall was occupied by a boy dressed all in white, who was watching them intently.

The characters below chanted softly. Unbeknownst to them, Ezekiel was answering them from above.

Parents: Death is so quiet

Ezekiel: It's so peaceful, now I can rest.

Sister: Death is so solemn

Ezekiel: Tell a joke little one, you tell the best.

Teachers: Death is so frightening

Ezekiel: Please don't be frightened, I'll be fine.

Friends: Death is so

Ezekiel: Yes, death is so

There was a short pause as Ezekiel's best friend, Ben, laid a rose softly on the coffin.

Ben: I'll miss you, my friend

Ezekiel: Yes, I know

Ezekiel: But we've come to the end

Ben: Yes, I know

Friends: Death is so... final.

Ezekiel: It's time to say goodbye...

Another short pause held over the unmoving crowd, and the mourners took one last look at the coffin. In unison, they sang a softly held note.

All: Goodbye...

The stage faded to black again. No one moved. Clay felt like he'd been punched in the gut. There was silence until the house lights came up softly. The stage was lined with actors all in one row; it was the end. As the audience clapped for their parts, each actor took his or her bow.

George was the last to take his praise from the crowd; he took one step forward and bowed. Clay felt himself being swept to his feet along with the rest of the audience; he clapped harder than he ever had before, and when roses flew through the air towards the stage, he added his to the collection.

His rose flew through the air in a graceful trajectory and connected gently with George's knee. The brunet on stage laughed and bent down to pick it up, then scanned the audience to see where it had come from.

Uh-oh! Clay thought. It was too late to go undetected, however. Clay suddenly felt a flush cross his cheeks as he locked eyes with a pair of obsidian brown. George's smile faltered momentarily, replaced with a look of complete surprise. Clay didn't know what to do, so he simply kept clapping. George recovered quickly and took one last bow alongside his castmates, then disappeared backstage.

Clay watched him go, then realized that everyone else was getting up and heading for the doors. He stood in a daze, and after casting one last look to the stage, merged with the steady stream gravitating towards reality.

"Hey."

The boy in front of him looked up in surprise, dark hair falling over one umber eye. The sunlight

caught the side of his face, softening the angled edges of his cheekbone, the bowed line of his mouth. Today the dark brown irises were less wary than usual; George evaluated the boy standing over him carefully. Clay stood in front of the other sophomore's desk, fidgeting slightly. After cautiously appraising him, George returned the sentiment softly.

"Hey."

Clay looked at his feet for a second before glancing back up. He cleared his throat and steeled himself. *You can do it, Clay!*

"You... were amazing last night."

Too late, he realized what he'd said. He backtracked hurriedly.

"Uh, I meant—"

He was cut off by a smooth, bell-like laugh. He stopped his explanation immediately in favor of staring in stunned surprise. George was laughing at him? Sure, he hadn't meant to be funny, but he'd take what he could get! After a few seconds, however, George regained enough control to speak.

"I know what you meant," he assured the soccer player. Clay felt himself puff up slightly. George wasn't yelling at him! He'd given that compliment without messing up!

A sudden thought crossed his mind. He was doing great at this so far. What if George came with him to the party tomorrow night? Clay was about to ask when a memory suddenly stirred. Dark eyes stared accusingly down from his subconscious.

- *"You'll never understand what I need you to be!"*

Clay came back down to earth with a shudder and realized that George was now watching him with a slightly worried expression. He blushed as he realized that he'd been staring at George for half a minute, opening and closing his mouth like a fish. Struggling to maintain his dignity, he lifted his head once again.

"Well, anyway... you were incredible."

George tilted his head and flicked his eyes over Clay's face, as if testing for sincerity, then seemed to come to a conclusion. He smiled, the first real smile Clay had ever seen on his face. It wasn't a big smile or an especially trusting smile, but Clay felt a balloon of warmth swelling in him at the sight anyway. George looked up at him for another moment before responding.

"Thank you."

Clay smiled back. "Anything."

George tilted an eyebrow. "'Anything'?"

Clay slapped himself mentally. "I meant 'anytime'."

George smiled again, and Clay retreated to his own desk. He glanced back once seated and was surprised to find George still staring at him. Realizing that Clay had noticed him staring, George

blushed and returned to his homework. Clay beamed and faced the blackboard.

Though he hadn't meant for it to come out, Clay truly *had* meant it when he'd said "anything".

He realized at that moment that he would go to the moon and back in three minutes if George asked him to. He tugged out his spiral notebook and a pen, then glanced back at George. The other boy was bent over the book in his hands, mouth curved into the remnants of that beautiful smile. Right then, Clay fell truly and completely in love.

Anything for you.

Chapter End Notes

THAT WAS SO FUN TO WRITE

hope you guys liked it! comments are greatly appreciated <3

[twitter](#) & [tumblr](#)

List of Preconceptions

Chapter Summary

To date or not to date? That is the question

Chapter Notes

crawls out of dark George chapter! *disappears for another month*

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Act III, Scene 1

Cue boom lights. Bare set save for one spiral metal staircase leading up to a balcony set high on the stage wall. The Bird Man and Scarlet Man enter stage right, looking agitated, shaking their heads at each other.

Suddenly, the Bird Man whirls around and charges up the stairs towards the balcony. Dim boom lights, cue red lights. A gleaming red object is evident in the Bird Man's arms as he races up the staircase. It's the Scarlet Man's heart. The Scarlet Man watches his frantic ascent with resignation.

George balanced his elbows on the window ledge and let his chin drop into his hands. It was 4:30 in the afternoon, and already darkness had set over the campus. Students stumbled home in the gathering dusk, clutching their jackets closer to themselves in a vain attempt to keep out the bitter winter wind. Too many feet had churned the once-white snow in front of the student center into brown slush, but the untouched parts of campus were blanketed in a soft, gleaming layer of white powder. Streetlamps threw long orange streams over the world.

He smiled, softly. He'd always loved snow, though playing in it had often made him sick when he was younger. He was hoping that it would start to flurry again, as the weatherman had predicted. Watching snow fall was one of the most relaxing things in the world to him; it reminded him of England, his home from many years ago. It helped him think more clearly.

George's dark brown eyes blinked slowly, the light of the city reflecting in their depths. As usual when he was watching and not participating, he found himself falling deep into the rabbit-hole of his thoughts. He used to think about plays and stories when in this state, but now...

He heaved a soft sigh. Now it was all Clay Dream. The soccer player was the water on the floodplain of his mind. He now found himself immersed in two types of thought: Those regarding

Clay Dream with new eyes, and those reminding him of Ethan Salvador with old ones. He couldn't help but make the comparison. After all, from the first day he'd seen Clay Dream, he'd realized how similar the soccer star was to Ethan. Lately, however, he'd begun to divorce himself from that comparison. Yesterday's events had solidified the foundations of this new school of thought.

A warm, bubbling feeling expanded in his stomach region as he recalled the expression on Dream's face as he'd stood in front of his desk and struggled for words to describe George's performance. George had been unusually touched by the remarks... and amused by Dream's actions. He'd bitten his tongue, however, realizing how hard a simple compliment was for the other boy. He hadn't regretted it.

For a moment, he'd been afraid that Dream would just repeat his earlier mistakes; that he would let his enormous ego get in the way once more. He'd been surprised, however, and Dream had simply nodded his head abruptly and returned to his seat. George had stared after him, a smile growing on his face. Dream had turned back once to look at him, and with a start, he'd realized that he was staring. Staring! At Clay Dream! He'd quickly returned to his book, feeling the heat rising to his face, but unable to even out the smile that was still tugging on his lips.

A pristine flake of snow hit the window in front of him exactly at eye level. The sudden movement stirred him, and he straightened up, stretching. *I wonder if Clay likes snow.*

The thought jerked him fully awake. He blinked in amazement and ran a hand through his dark hair. 'Clay'?! *Did I really just call him by his first name?* He groaned softly and decided that there was nothing he could do about it. 'Dream' was swiftly becoming 'Clay' in his mind as of late, and the process seemed to be inevitable. He was falling, and falling hard.

The pink sky erupted outside his window, and large, fat snowflakes cascaded to earth, dotting the dark landscape below. Soon, the campus was nearly obscured by the billowing sheets of white. The wind whistled against his window, and he retreated to his bed.

The blue pillowcase beneath his dark hair smelled like laundry detergent. He returned his gaze to the window, though from here the only visible thing was the pink-tinged sky.

Clay Dream. Ethan Salvador. Clay, Ethan. Clay, Ethan. The names reverberated in his head, cycling endlessly until he wanted to scream. He pressed his fingers to his temples in a vain effort to relieve his oncoming headache. Clay, Ethan, Clay, Ethan...

"Augh!"

His own shout of frustration made him jump as it echoed off of the walls of his single dorm room. He sat up in bed, fisting his hands in his hair and staring desperately ahead of him; the desk in front of him looked blankly back. He blinked twice before focusing on a paper that was sticking oddly out of the nearest pile. It appeared to hold the directions to an English assignment. Only a quarter of it was visible; George had to cock his head at it to make out what he could: *'List all of the—'*

He sighed and righted his head. Just another list he had to—*wait*. His brown eyes widened in realization. That was the solution to his comparison problem! All he had to do was make a list of the similarities and differences between Clay Dream and Ethan Salvador, and he'd finally know just how dangerous it would be to date Clay Dream.

"A *mental* list," he said out loud. It would take too long to write it all out, and he didn't think he could get all of his emotions down on paper, anyway.

The sophomore fell back against his pillow. *This might take a while.* The snow whistled against the

window again, and he briefly titled his mental list.

To date, or not to date? That is the question. George snickered, but amended it into a more serious sentence: *To date Clay, considering his recent behavior, or not to date Clay, considering his former behavior and his likeness to my previous boyfriend?* Yes, that was the real question.

He decided to start with the similarities. They were more painful, but at least he could get them out of the way. Besides, if he listed the similarities after the differences, he'd be more inclined to look at the similarities through rose-colored glasses, and George wanted to be as objective about the situation as possible.

Similarities. He draped an arm over his eyes. At first, it had been easy to fit all of Clay Dream into one category: That of the egotistical, brutish, narcissistic jock. However, as time had gone on, the soccer star had defied the jockish stereotypes with surprising consistency. There was more to Clay Dream than met the eye. In this way, he was similar to Ethan.

Ethan had come up to him after the curtain call of *Guys and Dolls* (in which he'd been in the pit 'orchestra') in much the same way that Clay had after *Quotation Marks*. Both had shown surprising depth by not only coming to the play when they conceivably could have been doing anything else, but also sticking around to compliment him on his performance. The parallelism was eerie.

Yes, both Clay and Ethan had gone out of their way to get to him, and both had shown surprising depth of character by doing so. George closed his eyes again and began to tick off more similarities in his mind. They both had egos the size of the sun. Both had had 'fan clubs' that apparently had had nothing better to do than hang around their star all day. Both boys were stars at their sports; talented athletes, they never lacked for anything.

The biggest similarity, though, was the interest that both had taken in him. It was uncanny and peculiar that George should be pursued by not one, but two star athletes in his lifetime, especially when the only affiliation he had with sports was through pep band. Here he was, just a nerdy little theater geek who played the trombone, and two star athletes who had everything were flirting with him.

Another sigh welled up in George's throat, but he suppressed it. Though he strove hard for another similarity, he couldn't come up with one. It was time to admit to himself that Clay Dream was more different than Ethan than he was similar.

The most glaring difference between the two made Clay look exceptionally good by comparison. It was in the public attention that each paid to him.

George remembered vividly how Ethan would only hold him when no one else was around; he'd had to wait until they were alone and where no one else could see them before Ethan would wrap an iron arm around his waist. Ethan would not show outward signs of affection toward George if anyone was in the vicinity; he even refused to hold hands with him in the hallways of their high school. At first, George had been bothered by this cold behavior, but he'd eventually gotten used to it.

Clay, however, seemed determined to put even his smallest crushes out there for the world to see. George smiled suddenly, imagining the soccer star reading horrible love poetry over an intercom. It was the sort of embarrassing but sweet thing that Clay would do for his current love interest. It was true that Clay wore his—rather shallow—emotions on his sleeve, and whenever he was with somebody, he never passed up an opportunity to shower them with attention, to be photographed holding their hand or giving them flowers. Yes, Clay was certainly more of a charmer than Ethan ever was.

There were more differences between the two boys. In a way, Clay was more honest than Ethan.

Looking back, George realized that Ethan had constantly been eyeballing other boys, and had simply been hiding it from him during their relationship. Clay, on the other hand, was fairly forward about his roving eye: He made no illusion about the fact that he was out for a one-night stand, and a one-night stand alone. It was a shallow comparison to make, but in a strange way, it counted to George. Yes, between the two, Clay was the more trustworthy.

Clay had better friends than Ethan, that was for sure. George smiled as he recalled his unscheduled meeting with Clay's roommate, Nick. George knew that he could figure out a lot about a person by looking at that person's friends. If Clay could keep sweet, simple, intellectual friends like Nick around, he had to have some redeeming qualities. After all, a guy like Nick wouldn't live with Clay Dream if Clay was really nothing more than an egoistic brat. George had immediately felt at home with Clay's roommate, and he awarded Clay strong points for that fact.

He'd never felt comfortable with Ethan's friends. They were all on the top tier of the social ladder at Jefferson High School, and they knew it. They weren't outwardly unfriendly to him since he *was* their leader's boyfriend, but they recognized immediately that he didn't belong in their social circle, and had made no attempt to welcome him into it. To this day George harbored an instinctive repulsion of anything wearing a cheerleading outfit and too much lipstick.

The differences piled up. Ethan would never have waited as long as Clay had to gain George's attention; he'd simply have found someone else. Ethan had never apologized when he'd angered his boyfriend; Clay was on record as having personally delivered not only a flower, but an apologetic note as well. Ethan never went out of his way to cheer George up; Clay had pinpointed George's depression over his Thanksgiving plans and had single-handedly brought George's spirits up with that unbelievably cute paper turkey. Ethan was always serious, Clay was a goofball. Ethan was smart, Clay was... well, Clay. George felt that he could overlook that part.

George opened his eyes. The room was completely dark. He sat up again and made his decision.

From here on, he would stop putting Ethan's face on Clay's actions. He was tired of being afraid just because he'd been hurt once before. It was time to lay aside his old pain and learn to love someone again.

He just hoped it was the right choice.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked it! Comments are greatly appreciated :)

We're almost at 100k hits omfg

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Simple As A Feeling

Chapter Summary

A very unrealistic and very cliché rom-com new year, where George meets a certain someone in New York, at the Times Square

Chapter Notes

omg its almost christmas

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Christmas came and went, and left behind one hell of a clean-up job. Clay ran a hand through his newly re-streaked hair and fixed a bewildered stare on the once-stately Great Room. Beyond the large bay windows, the gardens twinkled serenely, but the interior of the mansion was still ringing with the memories of too many relatives thrown together at once. Today the final guest had left their mansion, and Clay and his father were now considering the clean-up job.

Allan Dream's perfectly oiled black hair bobbed up and down behind the monstrous free-form couch that ran perpendicular to the windows. Clay gave a desultory yawn and dragged the overflowing trash bag towards his father, who waved at the pile of wrappings he'd collected behind the couch.

They worked in peaceful silence for a few minutes before the dull roar of the vacuum cleaner penetrated the quiet, startling them both. Allan shook his at the next room and his wife. The movement broke their unspoken pact of silence, and he half-turned to his son with a small smile pulling at his lips, a baritone voice splitting the air.

"Well, Clay, are you all packed for your trip?"

The simple question sparked an obscene and explosive excitement in Clay's stomach region. He grabbed a box with more enthusiasm than necessary and smashed it into the garbage bag, grinning like a lunatic.

"You bet!"

"Haven't lost your plane ticket, this time, have you?"

Clay felt his face flushing. "No," he sniffed imperiously, struggling to save face, "I have not lost my ticket yet."

His father grinned his wolf-like grin and reached for another piece of wrapping paper. "Just checking."

Clay rolled his eyes.

The small yellow kitchen rang with the sound of running water and clinking dishes. George stood at the small sink and let the warm rivulets of soap run over his hands for a moment before returning the rag in his hands to a particularly dirty plate. He scrubbed at it studiously, brow furrowing in concentration. Snow fell gently outside the small window, and he felt himself slowly falling into a trance. Often he wished they could afford a dishwasher that didn't break all the time, but sometimes it was all right.

A squeal of laughter drew him back into the real world. He tore his gaze away from the snowman in the neighbor's yard and looked over the counter 'partition' that separated the kitchen from the equally tiny living room and entryway. A grin spread across his face as the source of the noise made itself apparent: His father, in an uncharacteristic display of humor, had pulled his mom into his lap and was now tickling her. She was retaliating by bopping her husband upside the head with a brochure from her work as a travel agent's secretary. Both simultaneously gave up as the Christmas special they'd been watching returned from its commercial break, and George turned back to the dishes.

As comforting as home was, he was ready for his New Year's Eve vacation. He was traveling with Karl and two other bandplayers to New York City to watch the ball drop in Times Square. True, they would be driving in Karl's mischievous and nearly fossilized 1990 Honda Accord the entire way there, but it would be worth it.

George sighed and reached for another plate. He couldn't wait.

Clay breathed a sigh of relief as the 'fasten seatbelts' light finally clicked off overhead. Finally, he was on his way. He leaned his head against the oval window and peered out. Far below, wispy pale clouds drifted in and out, partially obscuring the snowbound Cities. A snore interrupted his thoughts, and Clay turned an annoyed gaze on his seatmate. The heavyset man beside him was already fast asleep, just twenty minutes after liftoff. A small twinkle of saliva was already encroaching on the side of the man's mouth. Clay wrinkled his nose in disgust and redirected his gaze to the window once more.

He preferred night flights, just because he found it easier to bear a long flight when all was dark and quiet. Plus, the movies the airlines always chose to show during daylight flights were always terrible. Clay preferred to just sit and think—not like he would ever tell anyone that.

Another snore ripped through the silence of the plane, and Clay buried his head in his hands.

This was going to be a long flight.

George had never been so cramped in his life. The ancient Accord labored beneath the weight of

the four college boys and their luggage. Karl and Corpse sat tensely in the front seat, while George and Callahan were wedged in the back. The pewter-colored car shivered suddenly, and Karl clutched the steering wheel so hard his knuckles turned white, cursing under his breath. George watched for a minute, then leaned his head back and glanced out the window.

The night sky peered suspiciously back at him, as if he were the one responsible for traveling 1,197 miles in the world's shiftiest car. He shook his head back at the cloud-banded moon and prayed that the road sign saying *Chicago* on it would appear soon. A light caught his eye and he pressed his face up against the window to see it, momentarily fogging the glass over with his breath. A low-flying plane eased over their heads, outpacing the little car effortlessly. George made a face at the plane's tail lights as it disappeared from his view.

A sudden tollbooth loomed ahead, and the road sign they were searching for finally rose out of the darkness. They were passing into Illinois. Three quarters of the journey remained. George sighed and settled back against the seat.

It was going to be a long ride.

"— attention passengers of flight 52: New York City to Memphis, please approach Gate 14 at this time —"

"— attention, please, would Mary Roberts please join her party at Station 2, Mary Roberts —"

"— shine your shoes, only four dollars!"

"Now boarding for flight 22 —"

Clay ducked his head and shouldered his way determinedly through the crowds of people at the LaGuardia Airport in the Queens area of New York City. He glanced out one of the long windows and was greeted by the flashing lights of Grand Central Parkway. A smile briefly flashed across his face, then was driven away by a yawn. The revolving doors of the exit loomed ahead, and he increased his pace, red canvas suitcase bouncing against his leg with every stride.

The cold night air was a blessing after five hours of being cooped up in a hot airplane and the crowded terminal. Clay sighed and stepped underneath the hood of the terminal bus's stop. It would take him to Grand Central Parkway, where he would hail a taxi and get to his hotel room—*and all of this before three in the morning*, he thought ruefully.

The streetlight shone down on his watch. 1:35 announced the dark hands. Clay fixed his eyes on the parkway in front of him and waited.

The inside of the Accord reverberated with the cheers of four exhausted boys. The sign that had caused the celebration flashed past George's window. He turned to watch it go.

"Welcome to New York City, boys! *Whoo!*" Karl shouted, banging his hands on the steering wheel

with newfound energy. Corpse rolled down his window and howled out the window.

"Greetings, Big Apple, from the Frozen North!"

George laughed as the two boys in the front seat celebrated the end of their nineteen-hour trek. It had been a long, hard journey; they'd lost their way four times, and the Accord had shaken and rattled the entire way. He was glad to be done. A groan came from his left, and he glanced over at the last occupant of the car.

Callahan rubbed his temples, nursing a migraine that had started when they'd ended up lost in Chicago and had had to ask directions from a prostitute. George had complimented the girl on her over-the-top pink boa, and she'd laughed and looped it around his neck before sending them on their way. Now it sat in his lap—he had no idea what to do with a memento from a hooker.

George felt eyes on him, and he caught Karl's eyes in the rearview mirror. George waved cheekily, and Karl laughed.

"Glad to finally be here, George?"

"You bet," George sighed. "Now find our hotel before I have to amputate my legs."

The night had finally arrived. Clay stood in his hotel room for a moment more, still debating his choice of clothing for the occasion. He knew he looked just good enough to score with someone, but not so pretty-boy that he'd get mugged. *I love this jacket*. He tugged at the zipper of the warm aviator-style coat once more, then turned out the light and locked the door behind himself.

A thrill of excitement traced down his spine like a bead of sweat. He'd only seen the famed Times Square ball drop on the TV, never in person. Somehow, he knew that this was going to be the best night of his life. He could *feel* it.

The crowd was already roaring in the explosion of sound and light that was Times Square. George felt himself jostled with every step, but found that he couldn't really care that much. The excitement was infectious, and he couldn't stop the ridiculous grin on his face any more than he could stop a train by pouting at it.

"Come on, Callahan!" he shouted over the commotion, reaching out a hand to steady his friend. A good amount of the crowd was already fairly drunk, and the four boys had taken advantage of the availability of alcohol in the area. As long as they didn't demonstrate their intoxication, the police wouldn't have reason to stop them. George could already feel the alcohol buzzing in his veins, but he was far better off than Callahan, who had had his first drink—ever—only fifteen minutes ago. George giggled, watching as the boy stumbled along behind him. He turned back to the rest of his friends as he felt someone bump him from the front.

Wait.

George frowned and stopped short. Where were they? He looked right and left, but the ever-shifting mass blocked his view. He tried to follow the path that they'd made through the crowd, but moments after he started, the people on either side of the path crushed together again.

He sighed and rubbed his nose, looking around in defeat. He'd lost them. Normally he'd panic, but the alcohol had turned his courage into a steel force. He'd find them somehow.

Callahan giggled behind him, and George rolled his eyes. The other boy was ogling a pretty girl in a Cleopatra costume. George latched onto Callahan's leather jacket and managed to pull him away before the girl's very buff-looking boyfriend had a chance to knock Callahan's teeth out.

While the other boy sulked, George looked around and was dismayed to find the police herding people into the corralled areas used for crowd control—once you were in one of the fenced-in areas, you had to stay there. They'd never get back to Karl and Corpse now. He pulled Callahan along as they were ushered into a fenced-in area with around seventy other people. A balloon in the shape of a baby passed overhead, diaper gleaming, handler in tow. The volume of the square increased suddenly and exponentially. George looked down at his watch.

11:56. Clay grinned down at his watch and back up at Times Square. Confetti drifted down lightly into his hair, and his eyes were still being assaulted by the explosive billboards beaming down at him from all sides. Four shots were now singing in his veins and he was feeling on top of the world. He had just been shoved into a barricaded area with a huge group of people, and was now jostling for the best view. A girl in an Egyptian outfit passed by, yelling something over her shoulder at an upset-looking boy in a football outfit.

Suddenly, his stomach was introduced to the steel rail as someone collided with him from the rear. He let out an *oof* of pain before straightening up and glaring in the offender's direction. The heavyset woman in front of him didn't notice; she apparently—hopefully—knew the person she was now squeezing. Clay found that he couldn't see anything while she was around. He looked around himself, swearing, and saw a more open spot at the edge of his area just as a gong struck. A voice blasted over the roar of the crowd.

"Sixty seconds to the New Year!"

Uh-oh. Cleopatra was back, sans boyfriend/bodyguard. She stalked up to George and Callahan and flicked her long black hair over her shoulder, eyeing Callahan up contemplatively. Callahan swayed and gave her a goofy grin in response. George felt his eyes begging to roll back, but managed to dissuade them in the nick of time.

She fixed her gaze on him instead and spoke.

"You don't mind if I... *borrow* him for a moment, do you?"

George finally acquiesced to his eyes' demands and let them look heavenwards.

"Fine, I don't care. Just bring him back in one piece, will you?"

She laughed smoothly and hooked a finger in Callahan's belt, leading him off.

"Sure thing, Tiger."

"Sixty seconds to the New Year!"

The crowd began to chant as Clay worked his way to the open spot, sweating. Damn it, he'd made it all the way here, he was going to *see* the ball drop, regardless of fat women. He pushed one last person out of the way and stumbled into the small area.

"Thirty-four! Thirty-three!"

He threw a quick look around himself—and stopped dead.

It couldn't be. It was impossible.

The soccer star scrabbled a hand frantically over his eyes and blinked them open again. The vision didn't waver.

"Thirty! Twenty-nine!"

His voice came out soft and tentative, but carried over the noise regardless, as if he and his vision were in an isolated bubble.

"George?"

"George?"

George froze. There was no way—*no way*—that *that* voice belonged to the person he thought it did. It was simply too much of a coincidence.

"Twenty-seven!"

He turned on the balls of his feet and blinked twice, the alcohol momentarily hazing his vision. It shouldn't be...but it was. Clay Dream was standing in front of him, mirroring exactly his own shocked expression.

"Twenty-six! Twenty-five!"

George felt rooted to the spot. Clay, however, didn't seem to be suffering the same symptoms: He stumbled slightly but made it over to stand in front of the other boy. They stared at each other, at a loss for words. Clay finally spoke.

"Hey."

George stared at him, then felt a soft smile across his face. This had to be a dream. It was too surreal.

"Hey," he returned.

"Thirteen! Twelve!"

George finally tore his gaze off of Clay's face. He glanced up at the ball, now swaying under the escalating force of the cheers below. Premature confetti drifted down from the sky. Clay turned to look, and George came to his side.

"Ten! Nine!"

Clay joined in the chant, and after a moment of surprise, George began to cheer with him. A dream, a dream, this had to be a dream. How else would he be in New York City, watching the ball drop on New Year's Eve with Clay Dream at his side?

"Eight! Seven! Six! Five!"

This was insane. George giggled to himself and swayed slightly. Clay's arm shot out to catch him, and George allowed the arm to wrap itself around his waist. An absurd feeling of giddiness filled him.

"Four! THREE! TWO! ONE!"

The ball hovered in the air for one final moment, then plunged to the ground in a blaze of silver glory. Streams of confetti poured down like rain, and hats and hands flew up to meet it.

"HAPPY NEW YEAR!"

And suddenly everyone around them was moving. Couples and friends alike ran into each other's arms and kissed the New Year into existence. George looked around in surprise. He'd forgotten about this part.

A sudden heated sensation on his ear made him pause, then jerk his head up in surprise. He found himself staring into Clay's emerald green eyes. Funny, he'd never really... looked at them before. His chest heaved slightly, and he blushed, knowing that Clay would feel it and know it for what it was. His worry dissipated, though, when it was apparent that Clay was having difficulty breathing, too—his lips were parted and his breath was ghosting onto George's face harder than usual.

George shivered and Clay's arm clutched him tighter, a steel bar around his waist. The other boy's voice caressed his ear.

"Happy New Year, George."

The alcohol sang in George's veins. A bright burst of courage flared deep within him, and without thinking, he wrapped his arms around Clay's neck.

Then they were kissing. George clung desperately to Clay's neck as the other boy ran his tongue over George's lower lip. He parted his lips immediately and let the roving tongue tangle itself with his. He pressed himself closer to Clay; he didn't ever want to let go.

Clay retaliated, running his hands over George's leather-clad back and up into the soft dark hair, pulling George's head back slightly to get a better angle in his mouth. George moaned softly, unable to help it as Clay's tongue locked around his. He felt frozen in time, in his own solar system

in which Clay was the only other resident. The crowd around them began to shift and break apart, but they remained locked in their embrace.

"Hey, you!"

George broke apart from the kiss reluctantly, recognizing the voice. Cleopatra was back; she evaluated him from behind her heavy eye makeup.

"Funny," she said, "I didn't sense that. I can usually tell."

George stared at her for a moment, then shrugged. Callahan ambled up from somewhere behind her, still grinning ludicrously. A smirk tugged at Cleopatra's perfectly painted lips, and she pushed Callahan gently towards George.

"See?" she said, "I promised."

"Thanks."

"No problem. See you around, Callahan."

Callahan's face momentarily fell as he watched her go, then shifted back into the goofy grin. He turned back to George, but lost his balance doing so. Clay reached out and steadied him. Callahan's hazy expression briefly cleared as he looked up at his savior.

"Hey, aren't you Clay Dream?"

Clay's mouth worked as if he wanted to laugh and growl at the same time.

"Yes," he answered shortly.

"...Huh."

Callahan stumbled off. George ran a hand through his hair and looked up at Clay, lips still tingling and raw. Clay gave him a scorching look that made him go weak in the knees, but Callahan broke the moment by banging loudly into a trashcan. George shook his head and looked back up at Clay.

"I have to go," he said softly. Clay could only nod. George smiled and took a few steps backward. "Happy New Year, Clay."

Clay watched him walk away, veins singing with alcohol and something else he couldn't quite place. A bump from behind got him moving again in the direction of the street, past police and costumed partiers alike. He could barely think far enough ahead to hail a taxi. As the lights of the city flashed past, Clay touched a hand to his lips in the darkness of the taxi. They burned and tingled; he could swear they'd spark if he touched them to metal. A small smile crossed his face and he leaned back against the seat again.

It *would* be a happy new year now, he thought. It just had to be.

Chapter End Notes

hope you liked the chapter ^-^

All A Mistake

Chapter Summary

Idiots in love, what will they do

Chapter Notes

im so sorry

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A sudden rut in the highway caused the small car to lurch to the left violently. A deep truck horn blasted, and the sound of creaking metal resounded throughout the tiny cabin as the driver corrected the car's trajectory. Inside the ancient Accord, four boys winced in unison.

"Damn it!" Karl hissed, clutching the steering wheel so hard that his knuckles cracked. The offended truck passed on the left, and the unshaven man in the pilot's seat tossed an annoyed glance out his passenger window. Corpse turned his own gaze away from the watery forest outside his window.

"Maybe you should get a better car then. Where'd you get it, anyway? Your mom?"

Karl cut him a killing look. "It cost me about two thousand dollars, *and* it's been with me for 3 years. Lay off."

Corpse turned back to the window without further comment. In the backseat, George chewed on his lip and sank down in his seat. Beside him, Callahan held his head in his hands, fingertips kneading his temples desperately. It was a bad day to have a first hangover. George sympathized, but silently and briefly. He had his own problems to deal with.

Specifically, he had his own *problem* to deal with. He chewed on his thumbnail absently as the sleet-covered city of Eau Claire slid past the window of the haggard hatchback. A warm front had hit the Frozen North while they'd been packing up the Accord for the homeward journey, and now they were paying dearly for their bad timing. Silver slivers of icy rain nailed themselves into the pavement of I-94W and plastered the passenger sides of the automobiles now crawling westward with a sheet of crackling white.

George wished that he could just fall asleep for the remainder of the drive, but every time he closed his eyes, fretful visions danced behind his eyelids. It couldn't be ignored any longer: He had to figure out *some* way to deal with the mess that he'd created.

He hadn't meant for it to happen.

He *hadn't*. New Year's Eve had been a mistake, and that was all; a horrible mistake brought on by

inebriation and nerves and the heat of the moment. A mistake, a *mistake*... He cradled his head in his hands, trying to block out the mantra.

"What are *you* holding your head for?"

George cocked his head sideways to look at Callahan, who had turned his pained grimace in George's direction.

"*I'm* the one with the first-timer's hangover."

George tried to laugh, but his throat constricted around it. Instead, a weird, high-pitched gargle emerged, much to the concern of his fellow passengers. Karl's eyes sought George's in the rearview mirror. "You okay, dude?"

George nodded furiously, hoping no one would press the issue, and forced himself to relax. He could feel Callahan's eyes on him, and prayed that he would look away soon. His wish was granted, and he relaxed momentarily.

Callahan made him nervous because he'd been the only witness to the kiss. True, Callahan had been out of his mind with alcohol—the fling with Cleopatra had proven so—but sometimes when one was drunk, the oddest things remained in one's memory. Personally, George felt that if *he'd* been drunk and had seen his friend kissing the local athletic star, *he'd* still have remembered it. Therefore, George had been watching Callahan on and off for most of the return trip, nervously, fixatedly. So far he'd had judged himself to be safe, though he could never be sure—Callahan was unreadable at the best of times, and this was *not* the best of times.

George rubbed a hand over his eyes and wished for the thousandth time that he'd been more careful. He'd been caught in the act, true enough, but the fact that he'd been seen kissing Clay Dream wasn't the only thing that was bothering him. It was the emotional fray he'd entered into when he'd made his foolish choice.

George tried to reason with himself as the city limits of Eau Claire flashed past: Clay was obviously tanked when he'd made his appearance on New Year's; there was a possibility that he wouldn't even remember their rendezvous. George held the hope up before himself like a bright shining balloon, then punctured it with a stab of practicality. He slumped back and stared out the window.

No, Clay would definitely remember. After all, it was what the other boy had been working towards since the beginning of the school year, wasn't it? He'd be sure to recall every last detail, every slightest movement, in spite of the alcoholic onslaught.

George sighed and began to worry at a hangnail on his index finger. Yes, Clay would remember, and so there was no easy out of this situation. George would just have to take another look at where he stood and try to plan out his next move.

Where *did* he stand, exactly? It was the question he'd been examining for the past fourteen hours. It was relentless and circular—he had no precise answer.

If he was honest with himself, George had to admit that the problem was no longer with Clay.

It was with himself.

He was afraid, purely and simply, that Clay was only in love with the front that George had been putting up for him. The fact was that while Classroom George was sharp and self-confident, able to stand up to and resist the world's most attractive soccer player, Real George was quite different.

Real George was more raw and vulnerable; he was needy and jealous and afraid. Sure, Real George had his good points—George felt that he had several good qualities that he rarely showed the world—but the fact was that Clay Dream had not fallen in love with Real George. He'd fallen for Classroom George. What would he think when faced with the real deal?

A sharp stab of pain drew George out of his thought-inflicted shell. He took his finger out of his mouth and winced to see blood welling up where the hangnail had been only half a minute ago. He sucked on the wound fiercely, trying to stem the flow, and submerged himself once more in his cycle of traitorous thoughts.

The inevitable conclusion could be ignored no longer. George felt his heart fall slightly. He tried to steady himself by remembering that he'd known all along that this relationship would never work. He closed his eyes and let his head settle into the corner of the seat and the armrest of the door. The solution was clear.

He'd just have to tell Clay Dream that it had been a mistake.

Clay was over the moon with happiness. His vacation to New York City had gone without a hitch, he had two weeks of vacation left before he had to return to school, and—and—he finally had the man of his dreams within his sights. Clay snorted to himself, then giggled at the thought. The *man of his dreams*—what was he, some girl? However, he couldn't keep a grin from spreading across his face at the thought, and he ended up resigning himself to the phrase.

Clay dropped back onto his blue and gold striped quilt, beaming nonsensically at the world. The ceiling stared back blankly, but even the indifference of the local architecture wasn't enough to bring Clay's spirits down. He was finally getting everything that he'd ever wanted.

The thought brought him up short, and his grin faded in favor of a more contemplative expression. Where had *that* thought come from? Hadn't he *always* had everything that he'd ever wanted? Clay furrowed his brow and dug through his cache of memories, looking for any slight smudge of unhappiness. Though he worked at it, he could find none.

From his first breath taken in the arms of the obstetrician at St. Joseph's Hospital, Clay Dream had had everything he'd needed. Growing up had been a blur of soccer and school. His teenage years had passed quickly—he'd come out to the world as a bisexual to a lukewarm reception and had begun his current dating parade. He'd grown to superstar fame in athletic circles around the Twin Cities. He'd taken his team to the state championship three years in a row. As the medals and trophies stacked up, so had his presumed happiness. His parents had given up trying to display all of his awards in one room—as they had given up trying to learn the names of his flings.

Yes, he'd had a taste of everything. His life had been great so far, so why did it feel like George was filling an empty space in his heart? He'd never lacked for romantic company, so why was he suddenly so fixated on this one boy? Clay sighed up at the ceiling and put his hands over his ears, as if the childish gesture could stop the flood of unanswerable thoughts.

Well, one thing was certain. He would just have to march up to George and tell him how he felt.

This plan of attack worried Clay slightly, for he now knew from experience how unpredictable the other boy was. George was moody at the best of times; he took offense to the smallest things and

reacted to the craziest neuroses. It was possible that Clay would still have a small battle in front of him when he returned to school.

Really, though, how much of a battle could it be? After all, George *had* kissed him only the other day, and it had been deliberate. The memory caused a stir in Clay's stomach, and he clamped a hand over the troubled region, the smile returning to his lips.

It was a problem, however, of 'running into' George in order to tell him how he felt. After all, the semester was over, and since he and George were in two completely different majors in the second largest university in the nation, it would truly be an act of fate if he managed to bump into George again simply on coincidence.

Hmm... Clay's brow was forced to furrow again as its owner contemplated the new obstacle. There was one way, but it was a long shot: The end-of-term paper for English Language and Society would be graded over the break. Professor Fitzgerald had instructed them to come pick their paper up at her office between eleven o'clock and three o'clock on the Monday before the spring semester began. Clay hadn't planned on picking his paper up—after all, he didn't really care about the class—but he was sure that George would be at the professor's office during that time.

It was all a question of being at the right place at the right time. Clay began to plan out his attack as the clock in the pub room struck ten. He would hang out in the building, just out of sight of the hallway to the professor's office, and he would wait until George walked by on his way to get his paper. He'd wait for a few moments, then 'coincidentally' end up in the office at the same time as George. He could offer to walk the other boy back to his dorm, and along the way he could finally tell George what he'd been wanting to for the past few days.

The simplicity of the plan made Clay giggle. It couldn't fail! Now, if these two weeks of vacation could just hurry up and pass, he could finally tell George how he felt.

The marble floor of the third-story hallway in the English building cushioned the sound of Clay's sneakers completely. Clay held a piece of paper in one hand; in the other was the latest issue of *Sports Illustrated*. He grinned to himself as he searched the wall on his left for his hiding spot.

There! A tiny alcove barely concealed from the dimly-lit hallway hid a short brass bench situated against a latticed window. Clay looked before and behind himself to make sure that no one was looking, then dove into the small space.

The bench was uncomfortable, having obviously been purchased more for the ornate brass designs than for comfortable seating. Clay shifted from side to side, frowning until he found an acceptable position. With a sigh, he sat back and waited patiently for his prey.

"Here we go! Professor Fitzgerald's office is number 306. Do you know how to find it?"

"Yes, thank you."

The receptionist flashed George a brilliant smile and turned back to the complex filing system behind her. George pushed off from the desk and wheeled around, determined to remember the address. *306*. A flight of stairs appeared behind the door to his left, and he took the dark metal

staircase to the door marked *Lind 300-350: Creative Writing and History of Writing*. George sighed and began the long trudge down the softly-lit hall, wishing he didn't care quite so much about his grades.

Clay was almost asleep when the dark-jacketed form passed him. He caught the movement only in the nick of time; springing up from his reclined position, he had to race to the corner and peer out into the hall to verify that it was, indeed, George that had just passed him. A lump built up in his throat as he watched the other boy make his way down the hallway.

All right, Clay, he thought. It's now or never.

He closed his eyes and counted to ten, then shot out of the alcove. The abandoned issue of *Sports Illustrated* fluttered in his wake.

"Mr. Davidson, how are you? Excellent. I suppose you're here for your paper. Let me just grab it for you. How was your break?"

George smiled and murmured a noncommittal reply. Professor Fitzgerald's graying head was tucked to her chest. A manila folder was taking up all of her effort—and all of her lap—as the old woman sorted through the essays. George waited patiently until the professor handed him the twenty-page paper with a flourish. He glanced at the red letter at the top as he took it. *A*. He smiled slightly, and the professor laughed.

"Very well written. I especially enjoyed your frank analysis of the 'turtle' chapter of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Yes, sometimes a cigar really *is* a cigar. Rarely have I heard a student express that view, however. Ah! Who have we here? Step closer; my eyes aren't what they used to be."

George turned and stilled. A bolt of nerves shot through his spine and pooled in his groin.

Clay Dream was leaning against the doorframe, completely ignoring the professor's cries for him to come closer. His gem-flecked eyes were fixed on George unblinkingly.

"I do say, come *here*."

The unyielding eyes finally rotated thirty degrees to affix themselves on the old professor's face, and Clay stepped away from the doorway and up to the desk. The professor muttered to herself as she searched through the manila folder once more, and Clay turned his head to fix his eyes on George once again.

"Hey."

He'd meant for the greeting to come out more smoothly, but something in George's eyes made Clay stutter slightly on his words.

The other boy's expression was clouded.

Clay felt hesitancy burst into his mind, and he took a moment to digest the other boy's body language. After a moment, he decided that he definitely did not like what he was seeing.

George looked like he wanted to run and stay at the same time; a conflicted light was roving in the brown eyes that were themselves alternating between Clay himself and the door. Clay frowned and spoke again, hoping to ease the silence. The professor's papers rustled in the background.

"How are you?"

George's lips parted slightly, then closed again. He squinted at Clay, shook his head, and mumbled something. Clay put a hand up to his ear in surprise.

"Sorry?"

George glared and stiffened before answering.

"I said I don't know!"

The outburst echoed off of the arched ceiling, followed by a swift slamming sound. Professor Fitzgerald looked up in surprise but found that she was now the only one in the room.

"Hey!"

Clay accelerated as his shout echoed down the hallway, determined to bring the retreating black-jacketed form closer. George was surprisingly fast, and he'd given Clay the slip back at the office. Clay had been completely shocked when George had yelled and flown from the room like he had, but Clay's quick soccer reflexes had served him well. The professor was no doubt wondering where they'd disappeared to, but Clay had had no time to stick around and explain. George's behavior was unsettling, and Clay couldn't allow the other boy to just slip away without explaining, especially when they might not run into each other ever again.

George made a sharp turn to the left ahead of him, and Clay's sneakers pounded into the marble below as he struggled to catch up. The squeal of his rubber soles echoed down the hall as he rounded the corner. He was getting closer, but it would take a long time to catch George at this rate. He'd have to try to stop him verbally.

"Hey!"

To Clay's surprise, George finally heeded him and stumbled to a halt in the middle of the hallway some thirty feet ahead of him. Clay slowed to a jog and stopped behind the other boy, panting and completely confused. George remained facing away from him, hands at his sides. Clay frowned and stepped closer.

"George, what —"

George's shoulders rose and fell as he let out a sigh, and then Clay was looking into a pair of defeated-looking brown eyes. Clay felt a pang and a rush of fear. What was going on? He couldn't let this happen; not now, not after they'd finally made some progress. George was acting... like he

regretted what had happened on New Year's Eve. Clay's heart sank painfully and he heard his voice trying to reason with the other boy, a note of desperation lacing the sentences together.

"What are you doing, George? Why are you running away from me?"

George just looked at him. As Clay grew more upset, his voice rose in pitch and volume until he was almost screaming.

"Why are you just staring at me? What's the matter with you! Say something!"

"Shut up!"

Clay stepped back and breathed. George's hand passed over his eyes momentarily before dropping back to his side.

"I'm trying, Clay, but you won't shut up and listen to me!"

"Fine!" Clay roared back, "I'm listening, so say it!"

There was a short pause, and then —

"...I don't know how."

Clay stared into the brown eyes that had become his entire world. He couldn't believe it. This was a dream; they weren't falling apart in the middle of an abandoned hallway. They were finally working it out; they'd *kissed*. They'd kissed. George was finally coming back to him; he just *couldn't* be rethinking this whole thing, not when Clay was finally so *happy*. He couldn't let this happen. His explosive shout startled them both, but he was too angry to care.

"No! You can't do this now! We've... George, we're *getting* somewhere now! We're not fighting anymore! You can't just turn your back on this, not after New Year's, not after I've changed so much for this, not after *you've* changed so much for this!" Outright hysteria was transforming Clay's normally reasonable voice into a verifiable shriek. George covered his eyes in his hands again and shook his head. Clay knew he was babbling, but he couldn't stop himself. He was too afraid.

"You're turning your back before you even give me a chance, George, and I'm trying so hard —"

"It's me!"

Clay stuttered to a halt. The brittle sentence hovered in the air between them, and Clay wasn't sure he'd heard it right.

"...What?"

George dropped his hands. His voice was heavy and quiet and reminded Clay too strongly of the crushed tone of his dream George.

"It's me, Clay." The amber eyes were so sad, and Clay felt that he could drown just from looking at them. *"I'm* the problem, and you just don't realize it yet."

Clay couldn't help the sputter of laughter that boiled up from his lungs and crackled like wrapping paper in the still air. He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"You're the problem? How can you be the problem, George? You're... perfect."

George gave a short, single laugh, and Clay found it so much more frightening because the other boy's lips didn't even twitch.

"Clay..."

"What, George?"

George looked down at the ground and back up into Clay's eyes again.

"Clay, listen to me, because I can't say this again, and you have to hear it. Clay, you're not in love with me. *Don't!* Don't say anything. You're *not* in love with me. You're in love with the George that you see, the one that's always cool and in control. You want the George that's self-confident and stable. Clay, that's not me, that's not who I am. You're changing all of yourself for me, and you can do it, but I can't, Clay, it's who I am! You're perfect, you're great, you're everything I want, and I—I —"

A shudder suddenly took hold of the shorter boy, and he stared at Clay with an odd, closed light behind his eyes.

"— I have to go."

George pitched forwards, knocking Clay to the side as he raced for the stairs. Clay made a grab for the sleeve of the black jacket, but missed and crashed painfully into the wall instead. He cradled his arm and watched George's back until the other boy vanished from sight.

Clay wanted to follow, but found that he couldn't. His feet wouldn't obey his mind, no matter how much he screamed at them. He remained as rooted to the spot as the trees outside the building were to their patches of grass.

No.

No!

He wouldn't let this happen. He was Clay Dream, King of the University of Minnesota, star forward of the best soccer team the University had ever seen. He had been named the Most Desirable Man on Campus for two years in a row! He never lost. He wouldn't let this happen; not now, not when he'd changed so much and come so far. He would make George see reason.

He was too busy feeling sorry for himself at the moment to even *try* to figure out how to win George back.

Clay was curled up in his bed, watching the Women's Entertainment channel on the television and eating ice cream. For the first time since he'd come back to school, he was glad that Nick had decided to wait until the last day of vacation to come back to their dorm room. Clay had no idea what the halfback would say if he came into the room only to see Clay curled up like a baby, eating ice cream and watching sappy romance flicks on the television.

Clay was stuck, truly and completely. He simply had no clue what to do next. He sighed and dug the spoon deeper into the side of the Chunky Monkey ice cream box as the woman on screen flung herself into the arms of her male consort. He grabbed for the remote irritably and muted the television as the onscreen couple kissed passionately, and turned back to his ice cream. The past four movies had all ended the same; the woman in the arms of her man, all conflict forgotten and all sins forgiven. So went Hollywood. It wasn't real, and now Clay saw why. None of those men

had ever tried to woo over someone as complex as George Davidson.

It really seemed to be over.

Clay had never expected George to say such things. True, the boy in the classroom was so cool and self-confident that Clay had known immediately that it was just a false front. He'd just never imagined that George would fear that Clay was *only* in love with this front. Clay shook his head at the Ben and Jerry's logo. What had George been thinking?

The next movie came on, and Clay unmuted the television. Sleet pounded against the window. It was appropriate, Clay thought: The weather matched his weepy insides. The woman on the screen unfolded a piece of paper and read it, one delicate hand pressed to her ruby red lips as she did so.

"*Oh, John!*" The actress ran to her telephone and dialed it, whispering endearments into the receiver. Clay snorted and considered shutting off the television. Love letters, really. Why would anyone —
Wait.

Clay bolted upright, twisting the covers and flinging the remote to the carpeted floor in his hurry. Wide green eyes fixed unblinkingly on the television, a lone thought unfurling behind them like a flag given a hint of a first breeze. He could hardly breathe.

Yes.

That was it. If he couldn't get George to stand still long enough to talk some sense into him, he'd just have to communicate some *other* way. Clay flung the sheets off of himself and raced to his desk, accidentally stubbing his toe on the corner of Nick's lofted bed in the process. He hopped up and down impatiently as he rifled through the top drawer. Had he kept it?

"Yes!"

The exultant cry echoed through the room, and Clay momentarily felt silly. The feeling quickly dissipated, however, when he held the small piece of paper up to the light of the television.

Mailbox 404, Comstock Hall.

He still had it. All pain in his big toe forgotten, Clay danced giddily around the room, even pausing to fluff up his matted hair in the mirror in his high spirits. He still had it. He clutched George's address to his chest and sank back down onto his bed, pulling a notebook and a pen to him as he did.

George was *not* crying. It was just the cold that was making him snuffle. His eyes were just overproducing water because it was so dry outside. Yes, that was it. He just had a cold and overactive tear ducts.

He looked miserably out the window and wondered who he was fooling. A blotchy reflection drooped back at him in the glass. He wiped at the window furiously, trying to make the miserable face go away. It wouldn't; instead, dark eyes stared back at him accusingly. Well, why shouldn't they? It *was* his own damn fault that he couldn't keep Clay in his life.

George knew he'd done the right thing. After all, Clay had the right to know that George really

wasn't who Clay thought he was. He'd saved them both a lot of heartbreak by cutting it off early. He'd thank himself later.

Right?

Maybe not.

Maybe he'd just made a fool out of himself for no reason. Rubbing his face, George decided that it didn't matter anymore. It was over and done with, and at least now he wouldn't have to watch Clay struggle to tell him that it really *wasn't* what Clay had been looking for, after all. Yes, he'd done the right thing by cutting it off early.

George stood up and grabbed his keys from the dresser. The marching band lanyard dragged after him as he strode stiffly to the lobby of the dorm.

The key scraped through the lock of his mailbox, and George reached in without even looking. The pile of mail fell into his hands, and he locked the small door behind him. The trek back to his room seemed to take a year.

The lanyard fell back onto the dresser with a metallic jangle. George flipped on the light switch and waited patiently for the fluorescent light to come to life. After two false starts, it did, and he regarded the mail pile in his hand.

Magazine, band letter, tuition bill... personal letter?

George turned the small envelope over and held it up to the light. A sickening feeling developed in his gut as he made out the cramped return address. No... *no!*

Why couldn't Clay just let this *go*?

Even the soft fabric of his quilt couldn't dampen the hysteria that was steadily building in George's mind. What could Clay *possibly* have to say to him? After that huge speech he'd subjected the soccer player to, why did Clay *still* want to talk? Did he think he could change George's mind?

Maybe he just wanted to tell George off for wasting his time.

George assumed the fetal position, clutching the envelope to his chest, afraid to open it. What could it possibly have to say?

Finally, George decided that it was no use putting it off. With trembling fingers, he slit the top of the envelope and extracted the letter.

Sleet poured down from swirling clouds and howled relentlessly at the windows of Comstock Hall, trying to get in at the boy who was sitting on the checkered quilt with his thumbnail between his teeth as he read.

Silently, George laid the piece of paper down between his legs and stared off into the dark far corners of the room. Snippets of the letter kept rising to the surface of his mind, no matter how hard he tried to force them back.

You can't tell me I don't love you...you don't know that... talk one more time? ...know you hate having people around, so what about Tuesday (tomorrow)? ... ten o'clock pm ...bench by the Chemistry building...I'll be there no matter what ... even if it sleets again ... Tuesday (tomorrow)? ... ten o'clock pm ... no matter what ... can't tell me I don't love you ... can't tell me...

George shook his head to clear it before crossing the room to the light switch. The fluorescent light sputtered as always before giving up, and then the room was dark. George stood with his hand resting on the switch, paralyzed. He knew that his mind should be going a hundred miles per hour after reading that letter, but instead it felt like every thought was an effort; it was like slogging through a thick mud without boots. Finally, he sat back down on his bed and fixed his eyes on the clock.

He began to rock back and forth slowly and rhythmically. It was an old habit and a barely conscious effort. Agonized thoughts flitted through his head as his body instinctively crumpled up on the bed. Clay would be in front of Smith Hall at ten o'clock tomorrow night, George was sure of that. The question was, would *he* be there, too?

The rocking intensified in speed and George clutched his stomach, feeling sick. He wanted to. *God*, he wanted to go. In his heart, George knew that Clay was everything he'd wanted since Ethan had left.

He also knew that Clay had no idea what he was getting himself into.

So it came to that, George thought as he finally stilled. It came down to either being selfish and giving in to his most desperate dreams, or being a coward and refusing to give Clay this chance. To give in and encourage the heartbreak, or to stay and never know what would have happened. George had always played on the safe side. It had never failed him before.

As the clock counted down the hours until ten o'clock on Tuesday night, George made his decision.

He wouldn't go.

He couldn't.

It was all an enormous mistake.

Chapter End Notes

last chapter next week! :) thank you so much for sticking this long <3

[twitter](#) & [tumblr](#)

The Third Act

Chapter Summary

A missing shot, or a lifetime and a day?

Chapter Notes

last chapter omg

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Clay sat on the black iron bench, unmoving, watching the hands of his watch tick closer to the silver-embossed ten. The night was a montage of swirling gusts of wet snow and massive buildings and trees. Clay tilted his head back and looked up at the stars through the sporadic patches in the clouds. Finding the brightest available, he squinted in concentration and made his wish. Feeling slightly foolish, he let his head fall forward again, chin resting on his chest in order to avoid getting the flakes of piercing snow in his green eyes.

He never thought that this would happen. Not in a million years would Clay Dream have dreamed that he'd be sitting on a bench in the middle of a snowstorm, wishing on stars that some *guy* would join him out here in the elements and give him a chance to explain himself. The worst part was that he wasn't just *waiting* for some guy to show up. He was hoping for it. *Praying*. Wishing with all his heart.

Clay knew that he was being a fool; after all, he figured that hell would freeze over before George would meet him out here in the middle of the night and in a snowstorm. He knew it was stupid. He *did*. He would have left already, but something was rooting him to the spot. Clay didn't know what it was, exactly—he could only describe it as a bizarre mix of stoicism and desperation.

He couldn't let George go. This extraordinary boy with the captivating obsidian eyes had taken up all of his focus and become his entire world.

The watch face gleamed in the darkness by the light of a solitary streetlamp. 9:50. Clay waited.

George waited.

The clock on the wall was mirrored in his eyes as he breathed in and out softly. It took all of his conscious effort to return his gaze to the textbook in front of him. The words blurred in and out and George could not concentrate on anything but the ticking of the clock and the sound of his own shallow breathing. No amount of Buspar could handle this; he was on his own.

A hollowness was tunneling itself into the center of his heart. It almost hurt, and George folded his arms over his stomach and bent over to try to stem the psychologically-rooted pain. It didn't work. The ticking of the clock only seemed to grow louder, and though George could cover his ears, he couldn't seem to stop his eyes from wandering back to the relentless march of the big hand of the clock.

The wind blew against the windowsill, rattling the battered glass. *Maybe Clay isn't even out there in this weather*, George thought, tossing a hopeful glance outside. His heart sank again as he watched a lone passerby struggle through the sleet.

No. Clay had said in his letter that he'd be on that bench at ten o'clock on Tuesday even if it was sleeting. In fact, Clay's letter had gone on to say that Clay would be on that bench even if the sky was falling on his head. If Clay was ready to face the apocalypse for George's approval, George was sure that the other boy would be out there in a little bit of sleet.

The thought struck him roundly. *Ready to face the apocalypse...*

He was no poet, and he wondered where the phrase had come from. He didn't even know if it was true. His mind, however, had a cruel way of coming up with answers that George really didn't want to face.

He turned his face from the window and forced his eyes back onto the notebook in front of him.

Act III, Scene II...

The Scarlet Man watches in resignation as the Bird Man swiftly ascends the spiral staircase. The Scarlet Man's glowing red heart is evident in the Bird Man's hand. The Bird Man explodes onto the balcony, high on the stage wall. He braces his arms on the railing, the Scarlet Man's heart dangling perilously over the edge. He looks down on the Scarlet Man, who doesn't move. They —

George groaned and dropped his pencil. It was no good; he couldn't continue. He had always known what would happen in every single play he'd ever written, but for some reason, this time was different. For once in his life, he didn't know how to end the play. He scrubbed his hands over his eyes and looked out the window. The voice of his high school drama teacher entered his mind unbidden.

-Love is a game of pitfalls, my young friend. You must be quick and bold not to fall too hard. Why quick and bold? Quick to recognize the situation you're in, and bold to take the initiative.

George stared out the window, eyes tracing the snow falling earthward outside his window.

-Quick to recognize, bold to take. Bold enough to take what you want the most. It's not a hard concept, but sometimes it takes a lifetime to learn. That's when you truly suffer: When you take your entire life to learn those two simple things.

The individual flakes blurred together into a wall of white. George stood, slowly and mechanically, and stuffed his room key into his pocket without looking at it.

Outside the snow whistled and groaned and peeked in at the empty room. A fluorescent light flickered and cast its baleful gaze on the stillness. A paper entitled *Act III* drifted in the wind of the radiator, and a black jacket gleamed on the bedpost.

The wind picked up and the snow came down in sheets. Still, Clay waited, unmoving. His face had gone numb half an hour ago; his hands fifteen minutes before that. The long hand of his silver Rolex pursued the big '3' relentlessly. *10:12 p.m.* Clay tilted his head back and looked at the stars again, cursing the brightest orb as it passed behind a silvery cloud.

Wishes on stars are supposed to come true. That was the whole point!

Clay sighed and leaned forward, bracing himself to stand. *Stupid stars.* He sat with his head hunched down against his chest, elbows on his knees, willing himself to accept the shiny *10:14* on his prized watch.

George wasn't coming.

He sniffled once and began to rise.

"Clay!"

The shout was almost muffled by the insulation of white around him, but Clay heard it. He looked straight ahead of him, not daring to believe it. He forced himself to take a deep breath, then slowly turned towards the source.

His knees went weak.

"Clay, wait."

The boy jogging up to him was gasping for breath. His dark eyes were wider than normal and something was missing from his ensemble. Clay couldn't quite put his finger on it, but he found that he couldn't care.

George was here.

Clay's smile bloomed, though hesitantly. George stopped a foot away from him, panting softly. The wind blew up abruptly, and a shower of icy crystals raced between them. Clay swore that George was flickering. For that terrible instant, George looked exactly like the phantom of Clay's dream. Clay felt his eyes grow wide.

Then the crystals were gone, and George was giving him a strange look, and Clay felt his unfounded fear receding in the lamplight. George was solid, he was *here*. There would be neither horrifying nightmares nor sweet dreams to follow this scene. This was the real deal. The realization shook Clay to his core, but he clenched his jaw and steadied himself. He had to get this right, exactly right, and he had to do it on the first try. The imaginary glue between his teeth dissolved,

and he gestured to the bench behind him.

"Want to sit?"

The bench was colder than before. Clay curled his mittened hands into the intricate metal swirls and loops below him and fought to remember the speech he'd planned out in the darkness of his dorm room. George faced in the same direction as he, but Clay could still feel the force of the other boy's watchful gaze.

He tilted his head at George and found the brown eyes round and watchful, gazing at him peripherally. The sight melted the icy grip of trepidation slightly; after all, if they were both nervous, they would both understand each other.

Clay furrowed his brow suddenly, realizing what George was missing. His voice held an odd, echoing quality as if he and George were encased in a snow globe, and the snow was making up the walls.

"Where's your jacket?"

George gave him a startled look, then dropped his head to give himself a once-over. His tone when he spoke was confused and surprised, as if he had simply forgotten entirely what he was wearing, or rather, what he wasn't wearing.

"Oh, I guess—I guess I left it at home."

Clay stared. "Huh."

George looked back. "Yeah."

Clay sat back against the iron behind him. George shuffled backwards as well. Northrop Auditorium gazed back at them, lights extinguished for the night, face gleaming with snow. The pregnant silence stretched on and on, until Clay felt that if he didn't say something he'd burst from the pressure into a million snowy crystals and float away. His throat constricted and he tensed, finally turning toward the dark form to his left.

"George —"

"Clay —"

Musical laughter echoed through the wintery air, and Clay had to smile at the sound. George's teeth glinted in the lamplight before disappearing again behind his lips. George looked down at the ground again, but Clay gathered his courage again and pressed on.

"George, I'm glad you came, because you didn't let me talk to you last time. I know you said all of that stuff about how we wouldn't work together, but I just don't understand —"

"You don't *understand*?"

Clay's jaw shut with a snap. Frustration rolled off of the boy to his left in waves. George sighed, and the crystallized air from his mouth drifted up into the night in a white cloud.

"Clay, I don't know *how* to make you understand. There are so many... *things* that could make us go wrong!"

George was up in a flash of powdery crystals. He took two steps away from the bench before

swinging around again. His eyes were bright and blank.

"Things like... like... Clay, if we *were* to start dating, do you actually understand that you would have to deal with me as a *boyfriend*? I'm not a very good boyfriend, Clay; you'd have to understand that first off."

Clay was already frustrated. "Why not?" he demanded, digging his hands harder into the iron loops of the bench.

"Do you really want to date a clingy person?"

Clay stared. "What?"

"Is that who you want to spend your time with? Someone who's always clinging to you? A guy who is always needy? That's what's wrong with me, Clay, and you'll never be able to *keep* me from hanging on you and needing your attention!"

Clay's eyes softened. "George, *all* people are clingy and needy. It's just human to latch onto someone and want them to be there with you all the time."

George laughed shortly. "Yeah, well if that's human, then I'm *superhuman*. Clay, I used to get *so* jealous when Ethan even *looked* at another boy, and believe me, he looked at a *lot* of them. You're a popular guy, Clay, don't try to deny it, and even if you just glance innocently at another guy—or girl, I guess—I'm going to get angry! Do you want that in a partner?"

Clay opened his mouth, but George cut him off swiftly. "Of course you don't. That's ridiculous. Clay, I'm messed up mentally, too. See these?"

Clay leaned forward as George withdrew a tiny pill container from the pocket of his jeans. George waved it in the air for a moment, then tossed it onto Clay's lap.

"I keep those with me at all times. It's Buspar. I have panic attacks."

Clay turned the pill container over in his hands. The white pills gleamed up at him innocently. George watched him for a long minute.

"So there you have it, Clay. Do you understand now? It's not cute, sarcastic, self-confident George you're dealing with now; it's clingy, jealous, *mental* George. That's why we can't date. That's why I shouldn't even be out here talking to you at this absurd hour. Okay, Clay? So just let it go."

George turned on his heel and began to walk away, but Clay wasn't having any of it. He flung himself forward, catapulting himself off of the bench and into the snow. The cry exploded from his throat.

"Wait!"

George stopped and turned, and was that a flicker of hope in his eyes? Clay couldn't tell for sure, but he was determined to say his piece. He pointed back at the bench.

"Sit down. You got to give me your speech, now you have to listen to mine!"

The other boy stood still, and Clay was afraid for a swift and awful moment that George was just going to ignore the directive and keep going.

"George," he said softly. "Sit."

George sat, and Clay watched him and knew what to say.

"I can't just let it go, George. You know that. I can't just let you decide that it's never going to work and then walk out on me! What were you thinking, that I'm just going to let you go without a fight? Is that really what you thought? Well, George Davidson, you don't know me half as well as you think you do!"

George's eyes were disbelieving. Clay narrowed his own eyes and continued.

"You think you can't trust anybody. You think nobody really loves you. Isn't that it?"

George didn't speak, but his expression told Clay everything.

"You think that just because you're a little bit different from the people I usually date that I won't be able to handle you. That's not true, George! So *what* if you're a nervous wreck, or suspicious, or —or whatever —"

"*God*, Clay, get it right!" George pushed himself out of his seat and stepped up to Clay's face, eyes on fire. "Clingy—needy—jealous—nervous!"

Clay looked at him. The silence stretched until he broke it. "Okay," he said softly.

George narrowed his eyes. "Okay?"

Clay felt the side of his mouth curve up gently. "Yeah," he said quietly. "Okay."

The amber eyes glared into his, waiting for an explanation.

"It *is* okay, George. I don't *care* if you've got the 'clingy-needy-jealous-nervous' syndrome. Do you know why? You've got me so... tangled up in you now that I *can't* care, and I just don't know how to explain to you that I'm not stringing you along!"

Clay ran a hand through his hair, and his fingers came back wet with snowflakes. He reached out, set his hands on George's shoulders, and pushed the other boy back onto the bench. George sat, and Clay knelt before him, resting his hands on the bench on either side of George's legs.

"George, I want you. I know I want you... even if you *are* a complete basket case. I just don't know how to prove it to you. Do you want me to write you another letter? Scratch our initials into a desk? Climb to the top of the physics building and shout it at the busiest passing time? I don't know what to do! You have to give me a hint or something, George; I can't do this by myself —"

"Then tell me you love me!"

The outburst echoed off of the trees and the snow and the face of the buildings ahead of them.

Clay froze. "What?"

George wet his lips and straightened up. He leaned forward and let out a shaky breath.

"Look into my eyes," he whispered, "and tell me that you love me."

Time stood still. Clay looked at George and remembered a dream he'd had months ago...

- "Then tell me..." The shorter sophomore's voice dipped lower. Clay strained to catch it. "Tell me

that you love me."

Clay froze, though he couldn't say why.

George's breath ghosted onto Clay's face in short gusts. Clay shook himself out of his reverie and smiled.

"That's it?"

George's brow furrowed. Clay laughed and took his mittens off, tossing them onto the ground beside him. George's face was warm against his fingers, and Clay let his thumbs rest against the other boy's cheekbones. He dipped his head to catch George's eyes again and felt a lump form in his throat at the brilliant, breathless pools of brown.

"I love you," he whispered.

George's breath shook as he exhaled. His voice was almost inaudible, and Clay had to strain to catch it. "...Really?"

Clay smiled again and ran his thumb down and over George's lower lip. "Really."

George's gaze bored into Clay's eyes as a basilisk would, and Clay tried desperately not to blink. This was it—he'd done all he could do. The brown eyes searched him quietly, and suddenly, it seemed that George had made his decision.

Clay had never before bothered to recall a kiss, but as George's lips met his, he knew that he'd remember this one for the rest of his life.

Chapter End Notes

...and they lived happily ever after.

i know I have not been responding to comments, I've been exceptionally busy these past few months, but I read and appreciate all of them and would love to answer if you have any questions

THANK YOU SO MUCH for reading! if you've been here since single-digit chapters, or months after the last chapter is posted. I hope you liked my silly little fanfiction, and I hope to see you again with new works <3

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